

# In the Web of Life



Virginia Terhune  
Van de Water

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In the Web of Life







"WHEN I THINK OF WHAT I HAVE LOST"

# In the Web of Life

by

Virginia Terhune Van de Water

*Author of "The Two Sisters"*

Illustrated



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# In the Web of Life



# IN THE WEB OF LIFE

## *Chapter One*

The two men faced each other. One was tall and rather plain of feature; the other, his junior by two years, was shorter and handsome. Perhaps the smaller man's eyes were not as steady as those of his companion. But many women prefer dark eyes to blue ones—and Ralph Morton had black eyes. His tall, plain cousin, Tom Morton, was less popular with women than was he.

"Tell me what scrape you are in, Ralph," counseled Tom. "It's better, you know, to tell me the whole truth if there is any way in which I can be of use to you."

It was what he had often said to this care-free cousin when they had been boys at school, and later at college, when he was a junior and Ralph was a happy-go-lucky, heedless freshman. But now they were men—and Ralph Morton was again in trouble.

He told his story—excusing himself frequently as he went along. It had been a foolish mistake, he said—an affair in which he had borrowed a little money he happened to need from a woman—a friend of his.

Tom started with a smothered exclamation, then controlled himself, but there was almost a menace in the voice with which he demanded——

“You borrowed money from a *woman*?”

Ralph avoided his stern gaze as he hurried on. There was nothing so bad in it, after all, he averred. He and the woman—Mrs. Evelyn Price—were good friends. Surely Tom had heard him speak of her?—the Prices, he might remember, lived in Baltimore.

Yes, Tom remembered. “Go on,” he said. “Please stick to your story.”

With a murmur of impatience, Ralph continued. He had often played cards with Mrs. Price and had often spent the evening at her house. She was rather gay and very jolly, and not a bit too straight-laced to play cards herself for money—so she could not blame any man who did the same.

Her husband, by the way, was a rich chap—

but a mere business machine. It so happened that several nights ago he (Ralph) had been playing with some men in Baltimore and had lost a lot of money. It was not exactly his, by the way, but some with which he was to meet the interest on a mortgage of his mother's. In fact she had sent him to Baltimore to pay it on a house she owned there—a house that had been her father's—and to see about having some repairs done on the building itself.

He had not expected to lose at poker night before last. But he had lost. His mother had written the man to whom she owed this money that it would be in his hands yesterday.

“So you see I had to have it,” Ralph declared. “I went to the Prices and talked the matter over with Mrs. Price. Her husband was not in. His wife said she was glad he wasn't, for he was in a very bad humor. Somehow lately she has managed to get in wrong with him. She suggested that I let her lend me the money. I simply had to have it, so I borrowed it. That's all.”

He paused awkwardly.

“And then?” asked Tom Morton.

“Why, I paid the interest on the mortgage

on mother's property, of course," he said. From his manner one would fancy that there was positive virtue in his having done this.

"And then?" Tom said again.

"Oh, d—n it, Tom, you make it infernally hard for a fellow to tell you a thing!" Ralph exclaimed.

"I don't mean to," Tom protested, "only if I am to help you, as you have asked me to do, I must know the facts."

"Oh, I suppose so," the other assented, still in an aggrieved tone. "Well, the long and short of it is that everything's against me. In the first place, here at 7 o'clock this morning came a special delivery letter from mother, asking me to come home at once. She's not feeling so well, she said, and one of the servants got into a drunken row and she's afraid to stay out at Homewood alone, and a lot of other things. So unless I would have her suspect that something's wrong I've got to go out there to-night. That's why I came on to New York immediately—to go to her, but first to see you. For—well, Tom—I've got to pay that money back.

"It seems it was Price's, not his wife's. He's a jealous old fool, and he's asked his wife what

she did with the cash. You see, it was the servants' wages—and he had handed it to her to pay them with. One of the maids, or the butler, or some one, asked him for some money yesterday—and then he learned that this particular servant, at least, had not been paid yet, and he raised no end of a row.

“His wife sent for me in all kinds of a scare. She's promised her husband that he shall have the cash to-morrow morning. She made him think that she had lent it to her sister. Her sister's going on from Philadelphia this afternoon to make her a visit. See? And—well, the money's got to be there!”

“I see,” said Tom Morton slowly. He was sure that there was something more to learn.

“You say,” he questioned, “that Mrs. Price's husband is jealous. Is he by any chance jealous of you, Ralph?”

Ralph laughed embarrassedly. “Well, yes, I guess he is,” he acknowledged. “You see, he's away from home quite a bit, and he doesn't know me well, and I've been about with his wife a good deal, and he's heard of it, and he's peeved, and if he thinks that she lent me the

money—why—oh, well, you know how it will be!”

“And you want me to lend you the money?”

“Why, yes—I would like it, Tom—if you can——”

“Certainly!” the other cut him short. “But how will you get it to her on time? You see”—with a glance at the clock—“it’s after four now—and you say the money must be in her hands to-morrow forenoon.”

“I thought perhaps you could get away just now easier than I could,” the younger man hurried on to explain. “You see, there’s mother wanting me and——”

He paused, and his cousin answered quickly. “Yes, yes, I see,” he assented. He had always loved Ralph. There was little that he would not do for him. From childhood the older cousin had stood between the younger one and trouble. Ralph was a lovable fellow, he now mused. His father had died when he was a mere child, and his mother had depended upon him for companionship and for much that the boy did not really possess in the way of understanding sympathy. But mothers’ eyes are blinded by affection. All these things passed through Tom

Morton's mind as he paused before uttering his next sentence.

"I will lend you the money, Ralph," he said at last. "But could you not telegraph it on to Mrs. Price?"

"Lord, no!" exclaimed Ralph. "Her husband would, perhaps, learn of it—and there would be a row. The only thing would be for you to call and give it to her in person—or at least hand her your check, which she could deposit and get the cash from the bank. You could do that, Tom, I'm sure."

"Yes," replied the other, thoughtfully, "I could arrange it, of course. I must telephone out to Homewood that I cannot be there to-night. You see"—he paused, flushing boyishly.

"Yes, I know," Ralph finished his unspoken thought; "Edith's expecting you to dinner, isn't she? I'm sorry to interfere with your scheme; but I'll see her, old chap, as soon as I get there and trump up some sort of a story to tell her."

He, too, flushed, but his cousin looked at him without suspicion.

"Thanks," he said gravely; "but I will 'phone her that business calls me out of town."

He would not let himself remember that Edith had promised to talk to-night with him about certain plans dear to both of them. Surely she would understand. Yet only last evening she had reproached him with being so much less enthusiastic than his younger cousin, Ralph.

"Ralph is always so intense and so enthusiastic about everything," she had said with a little laugh. "It would be a delight to have such a man as that make love to one."

The words had been spoken in jest, but they had made him vaguely uncomfortable.

He wished that Edith would not say such things—yet did they not prove what an innocent child she was? And did he not love her better than all the world beside? Could he blame her if she resented his absence to-night? And to-morrow evening her mother was giving a dinner to them both—an engagement dinner she called it, a rather elaborate affair in her pretty home in the fashionable suburb where she and the Mortons made their home. At that dinner Edith Hale's and Tom Morton's betrothal was to be announced.

"I only thought," Ralph was saying—and

Tom roused himself with an effort from his revery—"that if Edith expected you to-night she might be a little lonely if you did not come. So after I have dined with mother and quieted her nervousness I will run over and cheer Edith up a bit—if you would care to have me do so."

"Thanks," replied Ralph, "that will be kind of you."

"If she has other callers, I can talk to Constance, you know," Ralph added. "Connie's a good sort—even if she is Edith's poor cousin and such a sober little thing."

"She is a fine woman," returned Tom. And, remembering her presence, he felt a sudden sense of security. Constance, the orphaned cousin, who made her home with Edith Hale and her parents, was his very good friend. She would calm Edith's doubts, if she had any, with regard to his absence. But of course Edith would not doubt him. Did she not love him, and were they not engaged to be married?

## *Chapter Two*

Homewood is one of New York's most beautiful suburbs. It calls itself a suburb of the metropolis, although it lies on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River.

The New Yorker motoring through Homewood finds himself wondering why he is ever willing to remain in the noisy city, and the rider in the trolley car that runs near the residential district sighs with longing for enough money to live as the denizens of Homewood live. Here one finds large and handsome houses, green lawns, great shade trees and all the comforts of the city combined with the beauties of the country.

In one of these commodious houses lived John Hale, his wife and daughter and his wife's niece, Constance Medford. A few blocks away was the residence of Mrs. James Morton and her one son, Ralph. Tom Morton, Ralph's cousin, had an apartment in New York, but was a frequent visitor in his aunt's home.

It was on one of these many visits to Home-

wood during his boyhood that he had met and fallen in love with Edith Hale. She had been a mere slip of a girl at that time, while he was too young to think of marriage. But he had waited through the years that she had spent with her mother in Europe "finishing" the education that had been begun in a New England boarding school.

The four years in Europe had been in lieu of the college education that most girls receive. John Hale did not like women's colleges, yet he wanted his only daughter to have all the advantages his wealth could procure for her. This thought had reconciled him to four Winters without his wife and child, Winters which he spent in a hotel in the city. Each Summer he "ran across" to Europe for three months of vacation from business and of travel with his family.

Edith Hale had been back at home but six months when Thomas Morton asked her to marry him. She kept him waiting for three months before she gave him a definite answer. He was sure that his fate rested entirely with her, for blunt John Hale had granted him permission to seek Edith's hand when Tom, with

old-fashioned ideas of what was right and proper, told the girl's father of his love for her. At the end of their confidential talk together John Hale laid a kindly hand on Tom's shoulder.

"My boy," he said, his eyes suddenly moist, "I have always dreaded parting from my girl, but if she *must* marry, and I suppose girls will do it"—with an attempt at a laugh—"I would rather that it should be you than any one else."

"You honor me very highly, sir," Tom said, deeply moved. "I wish I were more worthy the trust you have in me."

"I do honor you," the elderly man said, "for no higher honor could be shown any man than to trust him with the happiness of such a girl as Edith—my only girl, too, remember. But I'm glad it's you, Tom, and I don't say it because you had a little money left to you by your father, nor because you are making a comfortable living from your business, but because you are a gentleman by birth and at heart. I used to be afraid that Edith might take a fancy to Ralph. They have known each other since they were children, you know, although

his absence at college and her absence in Europe kept them apart a good deal. Yet I rather suspected the lad was in love with her, but I discouraged him by my manner as much as possible. I would never approve of that match.

“Oh, I know”—as Tom uttered a protest—“that you and Ralph are cousins, and that you are fond of him, and all that, but, Tom, he lacks stability. He has no definite business, though he plays at the law a little, but he is too willing to have his mother support him. And I don’t like his principles, my boy, nor his views of life.”

This conversation had taken place some weeks before Tom Morton started for Baltimore to pay Ralph’s debt to Mrs. Price. He recalled it as he telephoned to the Hale home after Ralph had left him. Tom Morton and Edith Hale had been engaged now for a fortnight. It was Constance Medford who answered the telephone. She would call Edith at once, she said. But he checked her to ask a question first.

“Constance,” he said, “Edith is well and happy, isn’t she?”

"Why of course she is!" Constance replied. "Why shouldn't she be?"

The man laughed nervously. "Oh, I don't know, only I have just had a disappointment and it has upset me a little perhaps. I find myself called out of town on business. I will tell Edith this myself, but I just thought I would mention it to you now, for if she is depressed or disappointed you will cheer her I know."

"Of course I will try to," the girl agreed reassuringly. "Now wait while I call Edith."

A minute later the listener at the New York end of the wire heard the voice of the girl he loved.

"Yes," said the voice, "you want to speak to me, Tom? Aren't you coming out to dinner?"

"I can't, Edith," he replied guardedly, mindful of chance listeners on the wire. "Business takes me out of town to-night."

"Oh!" There was a note of mingled surprise and regret in the sweet tones. "Can't you put it off? Surely what you and I were going to talk about is more important than any old business, isn't it?"

"To us—yes indeed it is," the man said with

a tender laugh, "but—I simply have to go away, Edith. I'll be back in plenty of time for the dinner to-morrow night, you know."

"But can't you put off the business that's taking you away this evening?" she repeated.

"I can't, dear," he regretted. "I'm fearfully sorry!"

"So am I!" she returned briefly. "Good-bye!"

Was she vexed? the man asked himself as he hung up the receiver. He would write her a line before he started for Baltimore, and to-morrow evening they would be together at the dinner at which their engagement was to be announced. And at this thought his doubts vanished and the cloud passed from his face.

Edith Hale hung up the receiver, and there was a distinct frown on her forehead. It was still there when she sought her cousin Constance, where she sat in the drawing-room, playing softly on the piano.

Constance Medford's tact was not of the obtrusive kind, but it seldom failed her. It was this which had prompted her, after summoning Edith to the telephone to talk with Tom Morton, to leave the talker at the instrument in the

hall and take herself off to the piano where she made just enough music to prevent her overhearing a conversation that was not meant for her ears, and to prove to the engaged girl that nothing that she said was listened to by any one except the person to whom she was speaking.

"I declare it's too bad!" Edith complained as she entered the room in which her cousin was sitting, and at the sound of her voice Constance ceased her playing.

"Tom's not coming out to dinner this evening," Edith continued. "And he promised me last evening that he would be here! Yet now he lets some stupid business matter interfere with his keeping his word!"

"Of course it must be something that he cannot help, dear," Constance reminded the disappointed girl. "You must know that he would come if he could."

"Perhaps," shrugged Edith. Then she laughed at her own impatience. "I am silly, I suppose," she said, "but Tom does take things in such a matter-of-fact way that he exasperates me. I cannot imagine Ralph Morton's letting

anything keep *him* away from the girl he was engaged to."

Constance raised her eyebrows skeptically. "Nor can I imagine his being as conscientious about anything as Tom is. With Ralph I always think that if duty and pleasure conflicted, he would let duty go by the board."

"Well, he would at all events keep his word to his fiancée," Edith pouted again. She was annoyed by Tom's change of plans and found it difficult to regain her good humor. "Here I have a whole evening without any company. But," with a sudden smile, "perhaps Ralph will run over for a while. If so, I shall not miss Tom, for Ralph is such fun."

Constance looked at her reproachfully. "You do not mean that, dear," she said gently. "You will miss Tom less if you have somebody else here, but you know that you will miss him nevertheless, and that Ralph cannot take his place."

"Well, if he could, he would fill it better than Tom does!" Edith retorted, half in fun, half in vexation. "But come along and play some jolly thing for me and chase away my blues!"

While Constance Medford sat at the piano

complying with Edith Hale's request, her thoughts were busy. She had been living in this beautiful home since the death of her father a year ago. Her mother had died when she was a child. Now the girl was left with very little money, but with a knowledge of music that could be turned to profit. Her aunt and uncle had insisted upon her making her home with them. She did not want to be a dependent, she had protested, but John Hale and his wife had tried to impress upon her the fact that her presence in their house was a joy for which they would gladly have paid what John Hale called "a good round sum."

"You are an unspeakable comfort to us all," her aunt had declared. "And you cost us nothing."

Constance had accepted the home but had lost no time in securing music pupils among the children of the prosperous families in Homewood, and she had the satisfaction of knowing that though she was not allowed to pay board she was able to buy her own simple clothing. She hoped that she might soon begin to lay aside a little money each year so that she need never be a burden upon her kind relatives.

She could not help knowing that they all loved her and that she had proved helpful in many ways since she had become one of this household. Edith found her a safe confidant, and enjoyed her companionship, although the two girls were dissimilar in taste and character. Constance was fond of her pretty, brown-eyed cousin, and was always ready to make excuses for her sudden wayward impulses and swift changes of mood.

This afternoon, however, as the two girls sat in the gathering dusk—one playing gay little tunes, while the other listened, beating time with the tip of a shapely slipper—the orphan found herself wishing that Edith appreciated more the depths of feeling of which Tom Morton was capable. Could not the girl see, she wondered, that Ralph was attracted to her, and that he was showing his admiration with little thought that in doing so he was not quite honorable, that he was looking with longing eyes upon the woman who had just become engaged to a man who was his cousin and his friend?

As she compared the two men in her thoughts, Constance was conscious of a great wave of

sympathy for the older man, of an understanding of his bigness and fineness that brought a glow to her heart. Her fingers strayed unconsciously from the little tune that she had been playing and struck some minor chords, then wandered into a wistful, haunting air in consonance with her musings.

“Good gracious, Constance!” Edith exclaimed, “how melancholy that sounds! What *are* you playing? I asked for gay music, not for a dirge!”

The musician’s hands crashed upon the keys with sudden discord as she started violently at her companion’s ejaculation. Then she laughed apologetically.

“I beg your pardon, honey!” she regretted. “My thoughts were wandering and I forgot that you had insisted upon something jolly. But”—glancing at the little French clock on the mantel shelf—“it is getting late and we shall have to hurry if we would change our dresses in time for dinner.”

She put her arm about Edith’s waist and drew her toward the door. She was glad there was no time just now for further discussion of Tom and Ralph Morton.



EDITH FOUND HER A SAFE CONFIDANT



### *Chapter Three*

"I thought Tom was to be here to-night," Mr. Hale remarked as the family gathered about the dinner-table. "Why didn't he come?"

"Oh," replied his daughter with a vexed laugh, "he let a little matter of business keep him away. He telephoned to me an hour or two ago about it."

"I'm sorry not to have the boy with us," her father said, "but I do like the conscientious spirit he shows about his work."

"Yes," Mrs. Hale agreed. "He does not let inclination interfere with duty."

Edith was silent. From her face one could not guess her thoughts.

Dinner was almost ended when there was a ring at the front door bell, and a moment later a servant announced "Mr. Ralph Morton."

"Let him come right in and have a cup of coffee with us," Mrs. Hale ordered, and her daughter supplemented it with "Why, yes; of course!"

The most prejudiced observer could hardly

deny that it was a good-looking man who entered. As he paused in the doorway, his face lighted by a smile that displayed his flashing teeth, his dark eyes glancing from one to the other of the family group, Constance acknowledged to herself that Ralph Morton was far better-looking than his more sober cousin and that he possessed a personal magnetism which would be hard to resist were he to consider it worth while to exert it.

This evening he evidently desired to make himself agreeable, and he bent low over his hostess' hand, thanking her for allowing him to come in "just like one of the family," then he shook hands heartily with his host, cordially with Constance and almost affectionately with Edith. His voice took on an added gentleness as he spoke to her, half-familiarly, half teasingly.

"I did not need an excuse to bring me here this evening," he said to her, "but had I needed one I had it in the fact that I am the bearer of a message of regret from Tom. He is detained in town by business."

"He telephoned me that he could not come," replied the girl, looking at him keenly. "But

he told me he had been called out of the city."

Ralph flushed with embarrassment. Edith, noting this, wondered just why Tom Morton was remaining away from her. Was the "out of town" excuse a false one? Constance Medford, seeing Ralph's discomfiture, wondered with sudden suspicion what he was concealing. Why should he have said that Tom was staying in New York to-night, when Tom himself had said otherwise? And Ralph Morton, feeling the eyes of both girls focused upon him, laughed awkwardly.

"Oh, yes," he said, "come to think of it, he did say he was going out of town. I forget just where. The main point that impressed me was that he could not be here and that he was much disappointed that he could not."

"So he told me over the telephone," Edith remarked dryly.

"Never mind, darling," her mother soothed, hearing the sound of wounded feeling in the girl's voice. "To-morrow night he will be here for your engagement dinner. I cannot help thinking," she went on, anxious to change the current of her daughter's thoughts, "how

much surprised our neighbors will be when they hear that you and Tom are engaged."

The waitress had placed the coffee on the table and had withdrawn, so the mistress felt that she could speak without restraint.

"For, you know, Ralph," she continued, "you two boys have been here so much with my two girls that I do not believe any outsiders know which girl is engaged to which boy, or if there is any engagement at all."

Ralph laughed and looked across the table at Constance. "Well, I declare, Miss Constance," he said, jestingly, "it has never occurred to me that people might suspect you and me of having a tender passion for each other! Had you ever thought of it?"

"Indeed I had not!" she exclaimed trying to laugh lightly. She felt an uneasy doubt about this man. Yet she chided herself for it. He was a decent fellow, though he was conceited, and she was probably unjust to him.

"Cheer up, dear future cousin," Ralph rallied Edith. "Don't look so sad! Only twenty-four hours more and Tom will be here!"

"I wasn't even thinking of Tom," she declared. "I was just thinking that it is per-

fectly silly of you and Constance to call each other 'Mr.' and 'Miss.' You know each other well enough to say 'Ralph' and 'Constance.' "

"I should be honored to do so," replied Ralph gallantly. "How about you, Miss Constance?"

"I will call you just what Edith wishes," Constance evaded.

"It's an agreement!" exclaimed Edith, as the family arose from the table. She turned toward Ralph as he approached her. "Let's go into the drawing room," she proposed, "and make Connie play for us. But remember, Connie—no more dirges!"

"Why not have a waltz?" suggested Ralph.

"So soon after dinner!" exclaimed Mrs. Hale. But the young couple paid little heed to her and were soon gliding in time to a dreamy waltz tune. At last Edith looked up into her companion's face.

"Why," she murmured, "didn't Tom come to-night? I have a feeling that there is some reason for his absence which neither you nor he has told me."

"If there were," Ralph said softly, peering down into her flushed face, a glow of admira-

tion in his eyes, "I would have no right to tell you. You are his property, you know. I am only an outsider." He laughed bitterly. "I have no right to give any inside information—nor to say what I think, nor—worse luck!—what I feel."

Edith attempted to smile, but again suspicion seized her. And coupled with it was a vague wonder if, after all, she could ever love Tom as dearly as she had thought she could love him—as dearly, for instance, as she might have loved a different kind of man—a man, perhaps, who loved her more enthusiastically—a man—with a sudden blush making her cheeks hot—a man like Ralph!

Ralph Morton lingered long at the Hales' that evening. He and Edith soon wearied of dancing and allowed Constance to cross the hall into the library, which was her favorite resort and where her uncle and aunt were seated—one on either side of the large central table—reading by the soft light from the lamp standing there.

The pair made a pretty picture, the girl observed as she entered the room. What a beautiful thing married life was when a couple

grew old gracefully together and when their tastes were similar and their mutual love strong. Yet what a wretched thing marriage would be if two people were not congenial!

As she thus pondered there flashed into her mind the thought of Tom Morton and his strong character and of Edith and her excitable, affectionate, yet intolerant nature. Would this couple ever be the happy Darby and Joan that Edith's parents were? Marriage was a serious thing—so much more serious than young people appreciated!

She seated herself with a little sigh in a chair near the reading-lamp and her aunt glanced at her with an affectionate smile.

“So you are leaving the young people and coming in here with us old folks, are you?” she asked.

“Yes,” Constance smiled back, “they are having a strenuous discussion on the last new dance, and, you know, while I dance sometimes, I do not care much about it, so I thought that there might be room for me here.”

Her uncle leaned over to pat her shoulder reassuringly. “You ought to know that there’s

always room for you where your aunt and I are, dear child," he said.

"Thank you, sir," replied the girl gratefully. How good these dear people were to her and how much she loved them! Tears of gratitude came to her eyes, and that she might not show them she took up a book that she had this afternoon left on the table and began to read it. So absorbed did she become in the story that she soon forgot her surroundings and the young people across the hall. She was brought back to herself with a start by her uncle's voice.

"I declare," he said softly, laying down the volume he had been reading, "Ralph is staying very late this evening."

"Yes," agreed his wife, looking up from her magazine. "I wish he would go home and let Edith get to bed. She looks tired. Moreover," stifling a yawn, "I'm a little sleepy myself."

"Go to bed, then," suggested Constance, "and I will stay down here reading until Ralph goes. I am interested in my book anyway."

Thus urged, the two elderly people went to their rooms, stepping lightly that the caller in the drawing room might not suspect that they

felt he was outstaying their patience. For an hour longer Constance sat reading. Then she heard Edith's voice, and there was a weary sound in it.

"I think, Ralph," she was saying, "that I ought to send you home. I am sure that father and mother have gone upstairs—and I ought to go too."

It was not until Ralph replied that Constance appreciated that he had forgotten her proximity or that he did not suspect any one was within earshot.

"I know, dear," he said, "but there are so few occasions now when I can have a nice long talk with you alone, such as we have had to-night. And the times are getting fewer."

Edith tried to laugh. "Oh, well," she said, "I hope we will always be good friends. I don't see why we shouldn't."

Yet there was a wistful note in the voice that made Constance sorry for the speaker. Was she unhappy? Was she still regretting Tom's absence, or was there some other trouble on her heart? Arising, Constance started toward the door, but as she reached the hall she stopped suddenly. A sentence was borne to

her, a sentence spoken by Ralph Morton, in a low, agitated voice.

“When I think,” he said, “of what Tom has won and I have lost, I feel as if I could not bear it.”

Constance’s heart gave a glad throb as she heard the girl’s reply, although it was uttered in an unsteady tone.

“You have no right to talk to me like that, Ralph,” Edith began. Then, as she faltered, and her voice broke, the unwilling listener in the hall rendered further speech unnecessary by hurrying forward and making her presence known.

“I have just finished my book,” she announced easily, “so I thought I would come in here and see how you young people are faring.”

Edith turned to her eagerly, stretching out her hand as if to draw her cousin to her.

“Oh, Connie,” she said, “I’m so glad you came just in time to keep Ralph and me from quarreling! We’ve been boring each other to death.”

“And I must go home,” declared the man, no sign of embarrassment on his face. But Con-

stance saw that he held Edith's hand longer than usual, and she noted, also, the quiver of the girl's lip as she murmured "good night!"

The front door had closed behind him and the two cousins were on their way upstairs before Edith spoke again.

"I'm tired to death," she said tremulously, "tired of almost everything and everybody except you, Connie. I would like to go away where I need not see anybody for a while—except just you."

Constance drew her to her and kissed her. "You're just weary to-night, that's all, dear child," she murmured. "And you are disappointed about Tom's not coming. Try to think of how good he is, and of how he loves you."

To her surprise, Edith burst into tears. "Oh, Connie, Connie!" she murmured, "I sometimes think that it's a mistake to love any man!"

"Oh no it is not, dear," Constance said gently, but firmly. "It's not a mistake for you to love Tom."

But Tom's fiancée made no reply.

"Colors seen by candle light differ with the morning," runs the line of an old poem. Certainly to persons of impressionable or mer-

curial temperament affairs that seemed gloomy at night, when one was weary, assume a different aspect on a bright morning after a good night's sleep.

So to Edith Hale—awakening from a night of slumber undisturbed by thoughts of Tom's failure to keep his appointment with her—life was not the same kind of problem that it had been last evening. It has been asserted that we are more sane in the morning than at night. Certainly Edith Hale was her better, normal self on this Spring morning.

She dressed rapidly, with an appreciation of the beauty of the sunlight, of the budding trees, of life in general. She flung wide her windows when her toilet was completed, and, leaning out, drew in great breaths of the fresh air. The trees in the orchard beyond her window had put out little buds that were swelling almost into bloom; there was a soft green haze over the distant hills; it was Spring; she was young; Tom loved her, and—yes! she was sure this morning that she loved him!

A knock at her door made her turn and call "Come in!" She smiled gladly as Constance entered, ready for breakfast.

“Good morning!” Edith greeted her cheerfully. “Isn’t this a lovely day—and, Connie, wasn’t I a little goose to be as blue as I was last night? To-day everything seems different.”

“Of course it does!” Constance agreed cordially. “I knew you were only tired and disappointed last night.”

“Such a wise girl as you are!” Edith exclaimed, kissing her rapturously. “I suppose I was wrong to feel hurt at Tom’s absence. I did just the same—but I don’t now.”

“Then forget that you ever did,” Constance advised. “We are all moody sometimes and cannot really help it. Now let’s go down to breakfast. Aunt will be wondering where we are.”

An envelope lay at Edith’s place at the table and she tore it open eagerly, for it was addressed in Tom’s handwriting. It was the note he had written hastily yesterday afternoon after his telephone message to her.

“This letter may seem unnecessary to you, darling,” he wrote, “but I cannot go away without sending you just a line to tell you once more how sadly disappointed I am not to be

with you this evening. I am trying to console myself with the thought that to-morrow night, come what may, we will be together at the dinner at which we are to let our friends know that I am the most fortunate man in the world. When I think of what it all means, Edith, I can hardly believe that to such an unworthy person as myself this wonderful gift has come.

"I know you love me enough to be disappointed by my not being with you this evening, but by the time this reaches you the evening without me will be over and you will remember that nothing short of a catastrophe can keep me away to-morrow night. I believe the dinner is to be at seven-thirty. I shall try to get out to Homewood and to you by seven o'clock."

Edith Hale read and re-read the letter, her color deepening and her heart full of affection for this man who loved her so much. How could she have thought such horrid things about him last night? Even if he was not as handsome and as enthusiastic as Ralph, he was so good and so faithful and trustful that any girl might be proud to win his love.

"You look mighty bright and happy this morning, honey," her mother observed affectionately.

"I *am* happy," the girl rejoined with a smile.

“Why shouldn’t I be? The day is perfect, we are all together and well, and——”

She paused, blushing, and her father laughingly supplied the rest of her sentence—“And Tom’s coming this evening!”

“Yes,” she affirmed, “that is one reason why I am so happy.”

Then the talk turned to the prospective dinner party, at which there were to be eight couples.

“Tom will take you in to dinner, won’t he, mother?” asked Edith. “I think it would look well to have him do so, don’t you?”

“Can you spare him to me for so long a time as that?” laughed her mother. “I shall feel like a wretch, depriving you of him.”

But Edith insisted that, under the circumstances, she would prefer this arrangement.

“The news of our engagement will not be announced until the close of dinner, you know,” she said, “and it will be easier for me if I have a comparative stranger to talk to until then.”

“What about Ralph?” her father queried. “He will want to sit by you, of course.”

He looked at his daughter as he made this

query. He had known for some time that Ralph was in love with Edith, and wondered if she knew it too. He was glad when she shook her head decidedly.

"No!" she exclaimed. "I don't want Ralph with me. Let him take Connie in to dinner. Would you like to have Ralph by you, dear?"—looking across at Constance.

"I don't care who sits by me," Constance replied unconcernedly, "so long as the affair goes off all right. The conversation will be general most of the time, anyway—and Ralph Morton is jolly and good fun to talk to. So arrange the table to suit yourself, Edith, dear. It's your party, remember, and I do think that upon this occasion you might have matters just as you want them. Of course, put Ralph by me. If he doesn't mind,—I don't!"

She did not add what was in her mind,—namely, that she did not care who sat by her so long as Ralph did not sit by Edith.

"Somehow," she said to herself later as she arranged the flowers in the various rooms in preparation for the evening's festivities, "I do not feel at all confident of Ralph Morton's

honorable intentions nowadays. I hope that I am mistaken in my judgment of him. If so, I shall be only too happy to acknowledge that I have done him an injustice!"

## *Chapter Four*

“Mrs. Price is not at home, sir.”

The maid who opened the door for Tom Morton said the words politely, but with a look of ill-concealed curiosity. The man who had rung the bell was aware that this was an unconventionally early hour for a social call, and understood the maid's interrogative expression of countenance.

“Not at home?” he repeated. “I am sorry. I want to see her on an important matter of business.”

He was wondering if the girl's answer to his question had not been the one uttered by the servants of society women who wish to indicate that they are not caring to receive callers. He did not like to seem too persevering, but if he would be at Homewood to-night by 7 o'clock he must take an early afternoon train from Baltimore. So he put another question to the maid:

“Can you tell me when Mrs. Price will be in? Would I be likely to find her later in the morning?”

"I don't know, sir. Her sister's visiting her, and the two of them's gone out somewhere for the morning, and maybe for luncheon. Couldn't you leave your message with me? I'll give it to Mrs. Price as soon as she comes in."

"I'm afraid not," the man regretted. He could not give this girl his name lest her mistress' husband should hear of it and suspect that Ralph had been communicating with her. Ralph had warned him especially against doing anything that would arouse the jealous husband's suspicions. Then a happy thought struck him.

"If"—he hesitated—"you can give me an envelope, I will write a line on my card and leave it for Mrs. Price."

While the maid hurried off to fulfill his request Tom drew his visiting card from his pocket and wrote on it the name of the hotel at which he was stopping. He would enclose it in an envelope and seal this. He disliked to do it, yet what other course could he pursue? Mrs. Price might understand what his errand was and call him up upon her return.

"You think Mrs. Price will be back soon after

luncheon, don't you?" he asked when the maid returned with the envelope.

"I don't know, I'm sure, sir," answered the girl. There was nothing to be gained by questioning her and he handed her his enclosed card with a brief—"Please see that she gets this as soon as possible."

He had a long morning ahead of him and he was at a loss as to what to do with it. It was a perfect day, and Baltimore in Springtime would delight the heart of any lover of that beautiful city. Nothing would have pleased Tom Morton more than to walk here to-day with Edith Hale; but he was too anxious to get back to her to be allured by the prospect of a solitary promenade. Moreover, Mrs. Price might return and call him up at the hotel during his absence.

So, after an hour's stroll, during which he paused for a moment at the grave of Edgar Allan Poe to think of his tragically sad life, he returned to the Hotel Belvedere and asked anxiously at the office if any message had come for him. The polite clerk answered in the negative with a regretful manner that somehow comforted the stranger.

Buying several papers and magazines, Tom went into the reading-room and tried to forget his uneasiness, although he found it hard to fix his mind upon the daily news or the short stories and special articles which he attempted to peruse.

But the longest morning will wear itself away at last. It was almost 1 o'clock when he went into the corridor, where the telephone booths were located, and looked up in the directory the number of Mrs. Price's house. A servant's voice answered his call.

"No, sir, Mrs. Price isn't home yet," she replied to his query. "But she's telephoned that she'll be in about 2 o'clock."

Two o'clock! Could he deliver the money to her and yet catch a train to New York that would get him out to Homewood before it was too late? He hesitated for a moment, then the thought of Edith made him take a chance.

"I left a card with you this morning, you remember?" he said.

He thought he had recognized the voice of the girl whom he had seen earlier in the day.

"Yes, sir, you did," she replied.

"As soon as Mrs. Price returns give her

that card and ask her to call me up immediately. Understand?"

"Yes, sir—or"—with a little catch in her voice, "Mr. Price may be home before her. Will I give him the message?"

"No, don't bother him about it," Morton returned quickly. Price might be at home! If so, how could Morton see Mrs. Price without running the chance of meeting her husband? The New Yorker hung up the receiver with an impatient exclamation. He hated intrigue—despised it with all the disgust of a clean, straightforward, honest man. To think that he should be involved in such a mess as this!

Repairing to the dining room, he tried to eat some luncheon, but even the Maryland fried chicken failed to tempt him. Again and again he looked at his watch. It was 2 o'clock when a page came through the rooms calling his name, and he responded eagerly.

"Someone for you on the phone," the boy said.

It was a woman's voice that replied to his "Hello!" and the voice was so unsteady that Tom knew the speaker was agitated.

"You are Mr. Morton—Ralph's brother?" she asked.

"I am Ralph's cousin," Tom said briefly. "I have something here which he asked me to deliver to you."

"Oh—thank Heaven!" she breathed. "Do not bring it until after 3 o'clock, no earlier," she added hastily in a low tone. "Be sure not to come until then. Bring it yourself. Don't trust it to anyone else—for the servants and messengers may be watched. But by quarter past three I will be alone. Good-bye!"

Quarter past three! Then, no matter how much he hurried, he could not catch a train that would get him into New York before 8 o'clock!

It was exactly three-fifteen when, for the second time that day, Tom Morton found himself at Mrs. Price's house. On this visit he was admitted to the drawing room, where he waited impatiently while the maid took his name upstairs. He did not sit down, but walked nervously up and down the long room, watching the hands of the elaborate ormolu clock on the mantel shelf. The room was furnished rather

flashily with much blue velvet and gilt filigree work.

The mistress of the house, coming downstairs after having kept her caller in suspense for fifteen minutes, seemed to match the furnishings. Tom observed this, and, with his subjective mind, wondered as she greeted him if she had lingered in her room to put an additional touch of rouge to her cheeks and to apply the powder puff to her nose. Both applications were evidently recent.

The woman's manner was agitated, almost furtive, and she spoke rapidly.

"You come from Ralph Morton?" she interrogated.

"Yes," replied Tom, drawing from his pocket the envelope containing the amount of Ralph's debt.

To his inward amusement, Mrs. Price took the bills from the envelope and counted them carefully.

"That's all right," she said in a relieved voice. "This matter has upset me dreadfully. Of course I would do anything I could to help Ralph, for he and I are very dear friends, but"—with a slight hesitation—"well, to tell the

truth, my husband is very unreasonable, and he has asked me again and again about that money, and I assured him that it was all right—that I had lent it to my sister and that he should have it to-day. I was out when he came in at noontime, and he was still here when I got home. He said he had an engagement at three o'clock, but would not be gone long. So this is the only time I could see you. I just had to have the money before he gets back, for he is very cross about it."

"I see," said Tom. He found himself intensely embarrassed in the presence of this wife who spoke so frankly of her husband. How could Ralph have become intimate with a woman of this type—older than he and so artificial in appearance? Yet Tom Morton's manner gave no evidence of what was passing in his mind as he bowed gravely in bidding his hostess good afternoon.

"I have a train to catch," he explained tersely.

He had sent a telegram to Edith before leaving his hotel, telling her that he had been detained and could not get out to Homewood until nearly 10 o'clock. He did not let himself think

what this news would mean to the girl he loved — what it meant to him. Yet if he could reach the Hale home after the late dinner, while the guests were still assembled, the announcement of the engagement could be deferred until then. He would explain to Edith that the business which had taken him to Baltimore had detained him unavoidably. She would know, without his telling her, what a disappointment this turn of affairs had been to him. He stifled the sudden fear that perhaps she might not understand. Of course she would! Did she not love him? But he *must* catch the four o'clock train. Mrs. Price had kept him waiting so long that he would have to hurry to make up the time that she had lost him. He started for the door.

"Wait!" she exclaimed suddenly, drawing the portières hastily together.

There was a sound of a latch-key in the front door, and Tom saw the woman grow pale under her rouge. She looked at him beseechingly and put her finger on her lips to signal him to silence.

As the pair stood thus Tom Morton heard the front door open, then close, and someone walked heavily through the hall toward the staircase.

"It is my husband," Evelyn Price whispered, as the footsteps were heard mounting the stairs. "Wait until he is out of sight of the front door. If he saw you he might think you were Ralph and he would be furious."

"But," Tom demurred, "he knows Ralph, doesn't he?"

"No," she shook her head hastily. "He has never met Ralph, but he has heard some silly gossip about his taking me about a lot,—and he's jealous."

So, added to all the other disagreeable complications, here was a possibility of Tom Morton's being mistaken for his cousin by a jealous husband! Anxious to shake off the hateful atmosphere of deception and intrigue in which he found himself, he started toward the door.

"I must go!" he exclaimed.

But Evelyn Price laid her hand on his arm and detained him a moment longer, until she heard the footsteps of the husband in the room above.

"Now!" she exclaimed in a low voice, "It's safe. Go!"

She almost pushed him into the hall, though

he needed no second bidding. He noticed as he ran down the front steps that she closed the door behind him noiselessly. He wondered, with a ridiculous feeling of guilt, if by any chance the jealous man of the house was watching from an upper window his hasty departure and deducting his own conclusions therefrom. For might he not suppose that this was Ralph Morton, the man of whom he felt he had just cause to be jealous? Why had Ralph given him, Tom, the impression that he knew the husband of the woman whose name had been linked with his?

Then, glancing at his watch, all other thoughts were submerged in a recognition of the lateness of the hour. Hailing a passing cab, he sprang into it, and bade the driver make his best time to the station, promising him a generous "tip" if he got there before the train for New York left.

The driver did his best, but as Tom Morton, out of breath and panting with excitement, rushed into the station, the last car of the train he had planned to take to New York glided past the north end of the platform.

There are two kinds of love that a man may

feel for his betrothed. One kind has in its very nature a calm certainty of complete trust on the part of the woman. The man knows that she has absolute faith in him and that no chance circumstances can shatter that faith. She would have to be convinced by her own sight of his indifference or infidelity before she would doubt him. The other kind of love—and this is perhaps the more common—is accompanied by a hope that the woman will understand, a wish that she may believe in her sweetheart—but there is always the tormenting possibility that if circumstantial evidence were against him she might waver in her trust.

Tom Morton would have denied even to himself that his love was of the second kind described. But the fact that he found it necessary to assure himself over and over—"Of course Edith will not be angry, though she will be disappointed," or "The dear girl will trust me, even though I cannot be with her to-night," was proof that he was not entirely sure of his betrothed's confidence in him.

For some minutes after the four o'clock train had pulled out of the Baltimore station the man stood lost in deep thought. Then he went

to the ticket office and asked several questions. The next train for New York would not leave for an hour. It was the Congressional Limited, but it would not get him into the city until after 9 o'clock.

No matter how much he hurried he could not go to his apartment, change to evening clothes and get out to Homewood until after the dinner guests had departed. His hope had been that he might make the 4 o'clock train and reach his own apartment by 8:30, dress quickly and catch the 9:30 train to Homewood, arriving at his fiancée's house very close to 10 o'clock. Now that was impossible. There was no help for it. He could not see Edith to-night. And this was the evening on which their engagement was to have been announced! Yet, surely she would understand.

After a while he went out of the station and paced up and down the platform, thinking out his problem. What right had Ralph to exact such a sacrifice of any friend? Why had he not done his own mean work? Then Tom remembered his aunt—Ralph's mother—an invalid, the victim of confirmed heart disease, who would have been distressed and anxious

had her boy not gone to her when she summoned him. Perhaps his failure to obey her request might have brought on a serious attack of illness. Ralph was right to hurry home when she asked him to. Under existing conditions what else was there for an only son to do? Tom tried to put from his mind the temptation to remember that Ralph could have come on to Baltimore by an early train this morning, or that, after all, if he had done as his mother had asked him to do in the first place with her money instead of gambling it, all this trouble might have been avoided.

“We are none of us perfect, and we all make mistakes,” Tom muttered to himself. “And surely Ralph will do all in his power to make Edith believe that I have used every effort to get home in time. Since he made me promise to hand the money to Mrs. Price, and to her alone, he will be man enough to see that I do not suffer for it in the estimation of the dear people at Homewood.”

This thought moved him to telegraph to Ralph as well as to Edith. To the man he sent the following message:

"Could not see your friend until this afternoon. Missed train.

"T. M."

Somehow he felt better when he had sent off that wire. Ralph would know why he was detained and would be so sorry about it that he would lay especial stress on the fact that the business that had delayed Tom was most important. Perhaps—and Tom's heart glowed with the thought—he would even tell Edith the entire truth about the money, taking upon himself all the blame. Why, of course Ralph would do that! Tom would do it were the positions reversed, and certainly Ralph was better, more generous than he!

His heart was lighter by the time he had reached this conclusion. He would send a long telegram to Edith. How silly it was to confine oneself to ten words in telegraphing! As if a hundred cents, more or less, were worth considering when the matter of making an explanation was at stake.

So, with a fine disregard of expense, he drew a telegraph blank from its holder and set himself to the task of composing his message to his betrothed. He destroyed several perfectly

good blanks before he was even partially satisfied with the results of his cogitations. This was the best that he could do under the circumstances, he decided, as he read and reread his message:

“Important business made me lose train. Intensely disappointed. Could catch nothing earlier than 11 o’clock train to Homewood. Please send message to me at my apartment. Am sure you will understand and share my distress.

“T. M.”

He paid for the message almost eagerly. It was good to be doing something that would seem to put him in communication with Edith. He had asked her to send him a line to his apartment because he longed to be assured of her comprehension of his feelings. Of course she would send him a message. He would find a telegram awaiting him, saying that she understood and telling him to come out as early as possible to-morrow. What a comfort it was to be engaged to a girl who had faith in one!

All of which was a little like a small boy who whistles in going through a dark wood to prove that he is not afraid.

It was with a sigh of genuine relief that

Tom Morton boarded the Congressional Limited and selected his seat. He leaned back in his Pullman chair and closed his eyes with the consciousness that every turn of the wheels was bringing him nearer New York and the woman he loved.

## *Chapter Five*

During the morning in which Tom Morton was suffering from delays and consequent agitation, Edith Hale had been happy and satisfied with herself and the world in general.

Ralph Morton had decided that, as his mother was not feeling well, he would not go into the city to-day, and at 11 o'clock had presented himself at the Hale home in his automobile run-about and suggested that Edith might like to "take a spin" with him.

At first she hesitated, looking at him doubtfully. He laughed so merrily at her grave countenance that she, too, laughed.

"Oh, come along!" he urged. "I promise to be jolly and good and sweet-tempered and not a bit sentimental. I wasn't very nice last night, I admit, but I have decided not to cry any more over spilt milk. Go and put on your hat and coat and breathe some of this heavenly air. Good morning, almost cousin!" as Constance came out upon the veranda. "Do use your influence to make this girl come with me. I

have promised her not to talk anything serious and not to say a cross word if she will come. It's too bad," he added as an afterthought, "that this rig holds only two, for I would like to take you with us."

"Oh, thank you," Constance replied, "but I could not go anyway, for I have two music lessons to give this morning." Then, turning to Edith, she asked in a low tone, "Do you want to go for a ride, dear?"

"Yes," Edith acknowledged, "I think I'd like it, especially as Ralph has promised to be nice."

The man kept his word so well that his companion returned from the jaunt with her cheeks aglow and her eyes sparkling.

"He can be so jolly," she told Constance later, "that I do not see why he must sometimes get those silly sentimental streaks such as he had last evening. I have never seen two cousins more unlike than Ralph and Tom."

"They are alike in the fact that they both care for you," Constance remarked.

Edith flushed. "Yes," she said, "I believe they do. Yet in such a different way."

"Tom is much more stable than Ralph," Constance said. "He has depths of feeling which

Ralph could not understand. Both are interesting men, but Ralph is weak compared to Tom."

It was early in the afternoon, and the two girls were lying down resting. Edith had coaxed Constance to come into her room and "loaf" for a while. "So that you will look even prettier than usual to-night," she had said. And Constance had smilingly consented. She enjoyed Edith when the girl was in one of her sunny moods.

"You always have a good word to say for Tom," Edith went on now, "and he deserves all the good things any one can say of him. He is a dear old chap!"

Constance laughed. "Old!" she scoffed. "One would think that thirty years was a great age! You forget that in seven years I will be thirty myself."

"Well, I am only two years younger than you," regretted Edith. "But I don't want to grow old."

"You need not be afraid of age if you have Tom with you," Constance reminded her. "That is one beautiful thing about marriage when people love each other—they grow old to-

gether, so that neither is lonely. I was thinking of that last night as I looked at uncle and aunt."

"I know it's true about them," Edith agreed. Her face had softened, and there was a tender look in her eyes as she continued. "Father and mother make me appreciate what love really is. Oh, Connie!" with a long breath of joy, "how happy I ought to be and how happy I am! I have dear father and mother and you and Tom!"

"Last, but not least!" Constance teased.

"No—to-day I have been sure that he is first," Edith said. "I can hardly believe that only last night I talked as if I would be as happy with Ralph as with Tom. I was vexed when I said that. Now I know better, and I can never distrust Tom again."

Before her companion could reply there was a knock at the door and the maid entered with a telegram. "For you, Miss Edith," she said, "and the boy is waiting to see if there is any answer."

Edith tore open the envelope, and there was a tense silence while she read the message.

"No," she said, without looking up, "there is no answer."

The door had closed behind the maid before Edith spoke again. "This is from Tom," she explained, her voice trembling. "He says that he has been detained and cannot reach New York in time to be here for dinner, but will surely arrive about ten."

She made no further comment, but lay on the bed gazing hard at the ceiling. Her cousin touched her hand gently.

"I'm sorry, dear," she sympathized. "I know how much disappointed you are."

"This is the second time in twenty-four hours that Tom has failed me," Edith said. She picked up the slip of yellow paper again and looked at it as if she would wring from it some further information.

"It was sent from Baltimore, and was probably written right after luncheon," she commented. "It must be very important business that detains him."

There was a tinge of sarcasm in the words, but Constance ignored this.

"Indeed it must be," she assented. Suddenly she remembered her suspicions of last

night with regard to Ralph's knowledge of Tom's errand to Baltimore. As if reading her thoughts, Edith spoke slowly, musingly.

"I am sure that Ralph knows what the business is," she said. "I might ask him."

"Oh, dear Edith," Constance protested gently, "I wouldn't do that if I were you!"

"If Tom fails me again I will!" the girl threatened.

"But he won't fail you again!" Constance declared confidently.

A kindly Providence seems to have decreed that when one would feel justified in sitting down to nurse a grudge or a grievance, there are details which demand one's time and thought and leave scant leisure for introspection or self-pity.

Such was the case on the afternoon on which Edith Hale received Tom Morton's first telegram. It was Constance who reminded her that there was something to be done, and that quickly.

"You know," the older girl said, "that we must tell aunt that Tom cannot be here and consult with her as to whom we shall invite

to sit in his place. It is late now to secure an eligible man."

"I don't care who comes now," Edith complained. Nevertheless, she arose from the bed where she had been lying and accompanied Constance to Mrs. Hale's room. Here was held a consultation which resulted in Edith's telephoning to various bachelors of her acquaintance in the hope that one of them would be disengaged for the evening.

At last one was found who said that he would be delighted to take the absent guest's place—"even as a stop-gap, for to be invited to a dinner at such a home was an honor always."

The graceful speech brought a happier look to Edith's eyes, though her mood was still less buoyant than it had been earlier in the day, and she cherished in the bottom of her heart a slight sensation of resentment toward her betrothed. She was almost ashamed to acknowledge this, for it was evident that her mother and cousin felt nothing but sympathy for the man who could not be present at his own engagement dinner.

"Of course we will not announce the engagement until dear Tom arrives," Mrs. Hale re-

marked. "As Mr. Dayton is to take Tom's place at the table, I suppose he will sit by me at dinner—won't he?"

"Yes, I think so," replied Edith. Then she flushed consciously. "And," she continued, "I believe I want Ralph to sit by me, after all. You don't mind, Connie, do you?"

"Why should I mind?" parried Constance. She was sure that pique was at the root of Edith's decision. Edith herself hurried on to explain her change of position.

"You see," she said, "when I told you last night that I would prefer that someone else should take me in to dinner I expected that the engagement would be announced while we were still at table, and it would be easier for me to have a stranger to talk to then. But now I don't care. Ralph may sit by me."

This matter arranged, her spirits rose again and she chatted brightly and happily of having some music and dancing during the evening to detain the guests until Tom should arrive.

"You are always so good about playing for our dancing, Connie," she said with a little laugh. "After all, Tom's not being here to dinner will make our friends think that there is

nothing between him and me. The surprise will be all the greater when they do know. Perhaps, in spite of my blues, it is turning out for the best."

Throwing an arm about Constance's waist, she waltzed her the length of the great hall and back, then dropped down upon the piano stool and began to play a little accompaniment to the words of an old nursery song, singing it in her sweet girlish voice:

"Bobby Shafto's gone to sea,  
Silver buckles on his knee;  
He'll come back and marry me;  
Pretty Bobby Shafto!"

"He hasn't really gone to sea," she laughed, springing up from her seat and kissing Constance, who stood near her, "but he'll come back and marry me, nevertheless."

Her mother eyed her affectionately, yet slightly puzzled by the child's many changes of manner.

"I declare, darling," the elderly woman said, "you are to-day what the Scotch call '*fey*.' I don't know when I have seen you so gay."

"Oh, well," said Edith, bestowing a light

kiss on her mother's gray hair, "I wasn't gay a while ago when Tom's message came; but now I see I was silly to be hurt. All's well that ends well, and since he will surely be here soon after dinner it's all right. You see, we don't dine until half-past seven, and we will be easily two hours at the table, and he will get here by ten o'clock. So I'm just going to be happy and not spend time regretting what can't be helped."

"That's sensible, dearie," her mother approved. "It's harder on Tom, you know, than on any one else. But a business man's time is never his own."

Mrs. Hale, Constance and Edith were still talking in the drawing-room when the maid appeared at the door with the five-o'clock tea tray. Mr. Hale, who had just come out from town, joined the group, and in spite of his declaration that he "really didn't care a bit for tea," accepted a cup of it and drank it with an avidity that belied his words.

Edith was laughing at him and teasing him for his inconsistency when, for the second time that afternoon, a maid appeared with a yellow

envelope and said, as before, "A telegram for you, Miss Edith."

For a moment all the blood seemed to ebb from Edith Hale's face as she read the message and handed it to her father.

"You may read it to the others," she said dully. Turning to Constance she looked at her almost accusingly, "You may remember," she said, "how sure you were that Tom would not fail me again. You see you were wrong."

As her father read the message aloud she stood listening as if she had not known its contents before.

"Poor Tom!" Mr. Hale exclaimed. "It's too bad!" He glanced out into the hall. "Perhaps the messenger boy is waiting for a reply," he said; "but, no—I see he has gone."

"It is just as well," Edith remarked colorlessly. "I have no reply to send!"

Then, before any one could speak a word of sympathy to her, she fled from the room and upstairs.

When, ten minutes after Edith's flight from the drawing room, Constance knocked at her closed door, there was at first no reply.

"Edith!" Constance called softly, "let me come in, dear—just for a moment."

The key was turned in the lock and Edith faced her cousin, her eyes swollen by crying, her cheeks flushed. She was not crying now. Indeed, the spark of anger in her eyes had dried up her tears.

"What do you want?" she asked coldly.

But as Constance entered the room Edith's self-possession deserted her for a moment.

"Oh, Connie!" she exclaimed, covering her face with her hands, "I'm so mortified—so ashamed!"

Closing the door behind her that no chance passer through the hall might overhear the conversation, Constance put her arms about the unhappy girl and drew her close to her.

"Ashamed!" she repeated. "But why, dear Edith? There is nothing to be ashamed of."

"Yes, there is," Edith contradicted, her face still hidden in her hands. "I have let a man play fast and loose with me—have let Tom Morton flatter himself that I care for him, and now he shows me that he cares nothing for me; that he has so little sense of common decency that he will make me the laughing stock

of all those people who are coming here to-night. I can't stand it! I tell you I can't stand it!"

"Edith!" Constance remonstrated sternly. "Stop talking like that and listen to me. First of all, we must decide what's to be done about to-night. Then we can talk of poor Tom after that."

"'Poor Tom!'" Edith repeated scornfully. "I am the one to be pitied, not Tom!"

But Constance stopped her with a gesture. "It is a mistake," she said, "to talk about any one when one is angry with him—don't you think so? And besides that, dear, let us discuss the matter of the dinner first of all. There's no time to be lost—so gather yourself together. Your mother asked me to talk the matter over with you. I told her you and I would arrange everything, that you were always to be depended upon where pluck and grit were needed."

The appeal to her pride had the desired effect upon Edith. She raised her head from her hands, and consented to sit down on the divan by Constance and listen to her suggestions.

“Now,” the older girl said, “you must remember that nobody who will be here to-night knows that this was to be an engagement dinner, so nobody will expect an announcement of any kind—for all are in ignorance of the state of affairs—all, that is, except Ralph.”

The listening girl caught her breath sharply. “Yes,” she exclaimed—“except Ralph! But what is to be told him?”

“The truth,” said Constance decidedly.

“Then I’ll tell it to him,” declared Edith, a vindictive sound in her voice.

But Constance seemed to ignore this. “Yet,” she went on, “if you wish to have your engagement announced this evening it can be done. It will be very easy to explain that Tom was detained in Baltimore by business—in fact we could make something of a joke of the circumstance of the honored man’s not being able to get here even though he had made every effort to do so.”

She looked at Edith hopefully, but met no response in the gaze which Tom’s fiancée fixed upon her.

“No,” Edith said, “I shall not announce my engagement to-night—not unless the news

of it has already got out. If it has, I will deny it. For I am not engaged."

"Oh, my dear," Constance begged, "won't you let that matter rest until to-morrow? Then you can look at it calmly and dispassionately after you have heard Tom's explanation."

Edith paused a full minute before she answered with a hardness and lack of feeling that convinced Constance that she was making a tremendous effort at self-control.

"Yes," she said, "I will wait until to-morrow, when I shall decide this matter finally—although I think I know now what my decision will be. It all depends on——"

She stopped. "On what?" Constance asked anxiously.

"On what Ralph says about his cousin's business in Baltimore. He knows more than he has told us, I am sure—and I shall get the truth from him."

"Yes," said Constance significantly, "I think Ralph does know more than he has told us about Tom's mission to Baltimore—and more than he is likely to tell us."

"What do you mean?" demanded Edith.

"I would rather not say anything more just

now," Constance replied. "I should not have let mere suspicion make me speak as I did. Only I am sure that Tom is honest and true."

"And you don't trust Ralph!" Edith insisted. "You think he is not trustworthy, don't you?"

Constance took the excited girl's cold hand in her warm clasp. "Dear Edith," she said, "I am asserting nothing, except that the man who loves you is good and would not hurt you for the world. Try to trust him, dear!"

"I have trusted him!" Edith retorted, her eyes flashing. "I have trusted him again and again. And you see the result! No, I don't trust him now—and I don't care for him as much as he thinks I do!"

Constance rose with a sigh. "Shall I go down and tell aunt what we have decided about the dinner—that we shall not announce the engagement since Tom can't be here?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Edith, "please tell her that we will not announce any engagement—unless we have to!"

## *Chapter Six*

Looking around her dinner table at the company assembled there, Mrs. Hale told herself that, after all, the affair was proving a success. The men were clever and brilliant; the girls attractive and merry.

The dear soul had had many sinkings of heart over the combination of circumstances that had necessitated Tom Morton's absence in spite of his longings to be with his fiancée on this occasion. Edith's mother never doubted Tom's sincerity nor his intention to be present to-night. She had pardoned Edith's swift resentment, for she was sure that it was only the mood of the moment.

Constance, in telling her aunt of the decision with regard to the non-announcement of the engagement this evening, had not intimated that the girl was angry with Tom. The mother assured herself that her child's vexation had been only of a moment's duration. Had not she herself, Martha Hale, sometimes been out of patience with her own dear John? She hated

to remember that she had ever been so unreasonable, but she could not deny the truth.

“So Edith would rather wait to announce her betrothal until Tom can be with her?” Mrs. Hale had asked her niece.

And Constance had replied, “Yes, aunt. She thinks it would be better—unless you object.”

“Of course I don’t object,” Mrs. Hale had assured her. “Indeed I think it is a very natural preference on the dear child’s part. I am sorry for her disappointment, but it will all come out right in the end.”

The expected guests had arrived on time, the table was beautiful, the floral decorations, arranged by Constance’s deft fingers, very effective, and all was going off happily. Edward Dayton, the man who was taking Tom Morton’s place at Mrs. Hale’s right hand, was a pleasant young fellow who was glad to have been selected as a substitute for the missing guest. So agreeable did he make himself that the hostess forgot to be sorry for Edith. When at last she looked down the table at her, her daughter’s appearance allayed any doubts that might have arisen in the mother’s mind.

No other girl present was as pretty as Edith.

She had never looked lovelier than she did to-night, the proud parent observed. Ralph was evidently making himself very amusing and Edith was laughing even more than usual at his jokes and stories. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes almost unnaturally bright. She had, apparently, recovered entirely from her disappointment.

Opposite Edith sat Constance, talking to the man next to her in such a way as to entertain him, yet her aunt knew that her ever watchful eyes would be sure to detect any lack of attention on the part of the servants and that she would tactfully and quietly rectify it. What a comfort the child was in the house! And again the hostess sighed with satisfaction.

It was at this juncture that there befell one of those strange and unaccountable pauses in the conversation—one of the pauses which we all have noticed even in a room full of people who, a moment before, were all chatting busily. An old superstition has it that when there comes such a sudden lull an angel is passing by. Constance Medford was about to mention this tradition to her companion when a man seated

farther down the table asked, as if to fill in the awkward pause:

“By the way, where’s Tom Morton to-night? I rather expected to see him here, for”—with a glance at Ralph—“you two Mortons generally hunt in couples, don’t you?”

It was a thoughtless speech and might have passed unnoticed had Edith Hale not flushed hotly and started to speak. Ralph attempted to conceal her embarrassment by replying quickly:

“Yes, Tom’s missing all this fun because of of an overstrained sense of duty. He’s been called out of town on business.”

“Too bad!” said someone. Then the talk became general once more and Constance breathed more freely. Was it only fancy that made her think that several of the guests looked with some curiosity at Edith? Could the rumor of her engagement possibly have gotten abroad?

The glances had not escaped Edith’s consciousness, and it was with a nervous manner that she turned to Ralph when her guests were once more launched upon the stream of animated conversation.

“It was kind—and like you—to answer so

quickly just now," she said in a low tone. "For a moment I was at a loss as to what to say. But you did just the right thing."

"I spoke only the truth," he rejoined lightly. "Could I do less?"

The girl looked at him swiftly and searchingly. "You mean you spoke a part of what seems to be the truth," she corrected him.

"My dear girl!" he ejaculated, changing color slightly. "What do you mean? What are you hinting at?"

"I'm not hinting at anything," she replied. "I am merely saying that you know that there is a reason for Tom's absence—a reason which you have not told me."

"Are you sure *he* has not told you?" he asked suspiciously, watching her anxiously.

"Of course he hasn't," she replied. "I fancy it is to his interest not to, and that you know it is, yet are trying to protect him."

There was a long silence while Ralph set his wits to work. This girl doubted Tom; she believed that there was some other matter than business that was keeping him away; possibly that there was some woman who was detaining him. Of course, there was—but need she

know that the woman was no friend of Tom's?

As he reviewed the events of the past few days a great temptation faced this man. He was not in the habit of fighting temptations vigorously. All his life when he had gotten into scrapes there had been someone to get him out of them—as Tom was doing now. And whenever Ralph Morton had wanted anything he usually got it. He wanted this girl; he had loved her for years, although Tom had never suspected this. How easy it would be now to tell her again what he had as good as told her often before—that he loved her!

While Edith sat at his side, waiting for his denial of the justice of her suspicions, Ralph Morton made a mental survey of his position.

The instruments for accomplishing his suddenly formed designs were laid ready to his hand. Had he not a right to use them for his own advantage? For only an instant did he consider Tom—his cousin, his friend—kept away from the woman he loved by his willingness to help him, Ralph, out of trouble. He put that thought from him with a mental shrug.

Sophistry rushed forward, as it always does when one hesitates between right and wrong.

Such sentences as "Everything's fair in love and war," "The end justifies the means," "Every man for himself," ran through his mind. With such facile phrases he had slain good impulses so often that now they had only to show themselves to be felled to the ground by the weapons of the sophist. Surely he, Ralph Morton, had a right to the woman he loved—if she loved him.

He recalled some adage about "the heart caught in the rebound." Might not Edith's heart be thus caught? Or—and his own heart gave an excited leap—might she not already care for him? Could he possibly be blamed if he let her decide the matter of her future for herself and for him?

"Well?" Edith queried.

He came back to the present and his surroundings with a guilty start. Edith was looking at him inquiringly.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered. "Did you ask me a question?"

"Some minutes ago," Edith said gravely, "I suggested that you knew why Tom Morton is not here to-night, but that you were trying to

shield him. Your silence has been my answer. I was right."

"Oh," Ralph protested feebly, "you must not jump at conclusions, Edith. I have not intimated that dear old Tom is not the finest, squarrest chap in the world. Of course he is!"

He felt that in speaking like this he was doing Tom a kindness, indeed that he was actually sacrificing himself for his cousin's sake. If the girl did not believe him—he would not be to blame.

But his manner had not been of the nature to carry conviction. "Don't exert yourself to be so loyal, Ralph," Edith counseled. "I understand. As I said a while ago, it is like you to try to protect a friend. But you may spare yourself the effort in this case. It is too late."

She caught her breath when her father addressed her suddenly:

"Edith, child," Mr. Hale was saying, "you and Ralph were so intent upon some argument that you did not hear your mother suggest that you ladies go into the drawing room and allow us men to join you there later after we have had our smoke."

Was there a note of reproof or displeasure

in his voice? Constance Medford wondered, looking anxiously at the elderly man. Then as he met her eyes he smiled so affectionately that she smiled back at him.

"Dear child!" he murmured, as she passed him on her way to the door.

It was but an affectionate phrase, yet it warmed the fatherless girl's heart and she felt a swift understanding of and sympathy with her uncle. She was sure that he did not entirely trust Ralph Morton.

Then she saw that Ralph had accompanied Edith as far as the dining-room door and had detained her there for a moment. Had Constance Medford overheard his hurried words she would have felt that John Hale was justified in his doubts.

"What do you mean by 'too late'?" Ralph was asking in a low voice.

The girl scarcely paused in replying. "Just what I say. It is too late for you to try to shield Tom now."

Then she passed on out into the hall with the other girls who were following Mrs. Hale into the drawing room. And, although Constance watched her, she could see no sign of

trouble on her cousin's face as she chatted with her guests until the men came in from the dining room, when she suggested music and dancing.

When the merriment was at its height Edith slipped unobserved from the room. Her head ached and she longed to be alone for a few minutes, away from the lights and the noise. Going into the conservatory at the back of the hall, she stood in the fragrant gloom, trying to collect her thoughts.

Yet even here she was not to be left undisturbed, for the sudden ringing of the telephone in the rear hall broke in upon her solitude. The dance music kept those in the drawing room from hearing the bell, and the servants were evidently downstairs lingering long over their evening meal. Hurrying out of the conservatory, Edith answered the insistent summons. She recognized the voice of Mrs. Morton, Ralph's mother.

"Why, Mrs. Morton!" exclaimed the girl. "I am glad you are able to be up. Ralph made us happy this evening by telling us that you are better."

"Yes," answered Ralph's mother, "I'm bet-

ter. My telephone is here in my room so I don't have to exert myself much to use it. I just called up to repeat to Ralph a telegram that has come to him over the phone. I don't know that it's of any importance—but I always think a telegram should be delivered at once—don't you? Is Ralph disengaged just now?"

"Just wait a minute and I'll see," said Edith. She ran softly down the hall and glanced into the drawing room, where she saw Ralph dancing with a girl who was somewhat of a wall-flower and who was, evidently, having a beautiful time. "He's dancing," Edith reported to Mrs. Morton, "but I will call him if you wish."

"Oh, no," his mother replied quickly, "he might not like being disturbed! Can't you take the message and deliver it to him the first chance you get?"

"Certainly," agreed Edith. A pencil and pad were on the table by the telephone. "I will just write it down," she said. "Go on."

"Well, I jotted it down on a piece of paper just as I got it. It is quite long for a telegram. It says:

“ ‘Your cousin brought money. F. saw him. Thinks it was you. Be on your guard.’ ”

“ ‘E. P.’ ”

“Have you got it, Edith? And—oh, yes—it’s dated from Baltimore. I don’t understand what it’s all about. But I suppose it’s something that Ralph and Tom understand.”

“Yes,” said the girl in even tones, “I think it is something that Ralph and Tom understand. Good-night!”

It was with a dazed sensation that Edith Hale stood still for a moment after returning the telephone receiver to its hook. Her first instinct was to seek solitude for reflection—she longed to run up to her room, lock herself in and think out the situation alone.

This she must not do, for she might be missed at any moment and sought by her father or mother, and it would seem very strange if she were out of earshot. But right here in the conservatory she could be found at an instant’s notice. She simply could not face all those people just yet. As this thought came to her she glanced once more at the paper on which she had written the telegraph message, folded it, slipped it into the front of her dress and re-

turned softly to the semi-darkness of the conservatory.

Walking to the rear of the glass enclosure, she sank down upon a low wicker chair that stood in a recess formed by the plants. Here she was shielded from the sight of any one passing the door. She leaned back and closed her eyes wearily. Then, as she felt the tears starting, she sat up straight. It would not do for her to allow her tense nerves to relax yet. She had a part to play, a plan to arrange.

First of all, what did this telegram mean? There were only two persons besides the unknown sender who could answer that question—Tom and Ralph Morton. One of them must answer it, and the girl determined that Ralph should speak the truth to her about it to-night.

Who was "E. P." and who was the "F" who mistook Tom for Ralph? And why need Ralph be on his guard?

A sudden idea flashed burningly through her brain. Tom was doing something which he wished to conceal; there was a possibility that Ralph might be accused of it. Some friend was warning him in time, before he could become

a victim of Tom's efforts to masquerade as Ralph Morton.

The girl's blood boiled with anger at the thought of Tom's perfidy. Of course there was a woman in the case. Yet she had believed that Tom loved her, that he really meant all that he said of his happiness in their betrothal! She looked down at the solitaire diamond in her engagement ring. Even in this dim light the stone flashed with red and green gleams as she moved her hand. An impulse made her start to draw it from her finger, but voices at the entrance of the conservatory checked her, and, for the moment, she forgot all except the sentences that came to her ears.

The speakers were Edward Dayton and Beatrice Craig, the "wall-flower," with whom Ralph had been dancing just now. Although she cared little for dancing, Beatrice liked to talk and had a predilection for gossip which was so strong as to make her regardless of her duty of reticence with regard to the persons whose hospitality she was accepting.

"It's a lovely party, isn't it?" she was saying, "but the rooms are getting so hot that it's nice to find a cool place like this conservatory.

Edith Hale's a lucky girl to have such a home as this, even though"—with a little giggle—"rumor says she will not remain in it long."

The hidden listener had moved forward to make her presence known, then as she heard her own name her determination wavered and she shrank back farther into the shadows cast by the tall plants about her.

"Why?" Dayton asked. "Is she going away?"

"Oh," Beatrice Craig replied, "I'm not speaking by the card at all, but my mother ran in to see Mrs. Morton to-day, and Mrs. Morton mentioned that her son—Ralph, you know—was coming here to dinner to-night and hinted that there might be an interesting bit of information given out this evening. I guessed at once what it was, and I also noticed that Edith's wearing a new ring. She has several other beauties, too, but this one looks mighty suspicious to me. Besides that, didn't you see how she blushed when some one asked where Tom Morton was?"

The man tried to laugh. He was not interested in gossip and this vapid kind of chat irritated him.

"Why, to tell the truth," he averred, "I was having such a pleasant talk with my hostess, and was enjoying myself so thoroughly, that I did not take time to play amateur detective."

Even in the dark Edith felt herself flush with gratitude. What a nice man he was! But the speech that gratified her evidently produced the opposite effect upon Miss Craig.

"I assure you that I am no amateur detective, Mr. Dayton!" she retorted. "But I do not think it took any especial powers of observation to notice Edith's embarrassed manner—and, by the way—where is Tom Morton tonight? It certainly strikes me as queer that he is not here, for I have shrewd suspicions that he is the lucky man."

"I thought we were told at dinner that he was detained by business," Dayton replied coldly.

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl, and there was acidity in her high-pitched voice, "you men always stand up for one another! Well, if I were Edith Hale, and Tom Morton was engaged to me and stayed away from my dinner, I would——"

"Pardon me!" Edward Dayton interrupted her, "but someone is playing a waltz which I asked Miss Medford to dance with me. One of the young ladies kindly consented to take her place at the piano and give us a waltz of which I am particularly fond so that I might have the opportunity of dancing with Miss Medford. As I must go and find my partner, may I take you back to the drawing room?"

They were gone and Edith Hale sprang to her feet, her breath coming fast.

So that was what people were saying, was it? It was careless of Ralph's mother to let slip the bit of information of which the gossip had made so much, yet if Tom had been present to-night it would have been impossible for people to draw disagreeable conclusions. This was the kind of thing he was subjecting her to by his underhand methods and false actions!

She would find out the truth! The time had come for action, and she meant to act.

And with head held high and lips compressed, she started toward the drawing room.

She met her father as she was passing through the hall.

"Well, daughter, dear," he said, "I was just looking for you. Where have you been?"

"It was so hot in the drawing room that I went into the conservatory for a few minutes," she replied, avoiding his keen gaze. But he was not to be put off thus, and laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"Little girl," he said softly, "you are not worrying, are you?"

Her self-control wavered, and to conceal this fact she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him, laughing tremulously.

"Why should I worry?" she parried. "You are a dear, fussy old dad. Stop being anxious about me and my worries—for I'm all right, always!"

"Good!" the parent exclaimed, patting her cheek. In spite of his pleasure at the child's sudden tenderness for him and her assurance that she was "all right," he was not quite satisfied. "Her manner is too gay!" he complained to himself.

Yet, as he followed her with his eyes and saw her accept an invitation to dance, his fears decreased. Surely, he mused, she was looking happy, and she was certainly dancing charm-

ingly. As he noticed this, a smile of pride in his daughter replaced the frown of perplexity that his face had just worn.

Meanwhile Edith was pretending to give heed to the occasional remarks of her partner. But all the while she was conscious that Ralph was standing in the embrasure formed by the bay window, watching her. Once their glances met, and he smiled swiftly and Edith smiled back. Then, as the music stopped, and the young people flocked toward the hall where the air was cooler, she summoned Ralph to her side by a lifting of the eyebrows.

"I must be with these people and talk for a few minutes," she murmured as he joined her. "Afterward arrange to stand by the piano, for I am going to play for them all to dance."

He bowed in silence, although he felt an uneasy dread. What did she want to say to him that required such planning? Would she make his scheme to win her easy, or had he done something that displeased her?

He waited near her in uncomfortable expectancy for fifteen minutes while she moved about among her guests. At last she proposed a Virginia reel and summoned the various

couples into the great square hall—even insisting that her father and mother take part in the old-fashioned dance which, as girl and boy, they had enjoyed together.

“Constance is going to dance, too,” Edith declared, “for I don’t care for the Virginia reel and I’ll take her place at the piano. Ralph,” turning suddenly to the man at her side, “come on in and talk to me while I play ‘Pop Goes the Weasel’ for these giddy creatures to dance.”

“Oh, no,” Constance protested, “you dance, Edith, and let me play.”

But already Edward Dayton had stepped forward to claim Constance as a partner, and Edith shook her head.

“No, indeed, Connie,” she laughed, as she hurried away, “I tell you I don’t want to dance now.”

She seated herself at the piano in the drawing room, and the reel began. Ralph stood at her side, seeming to watch, with her, the company in the hall. She said nothing until the dance was so well under way that she and her companion were forgotten by the merry-makers, then she spoke in a low, tense tone.

"I am going to put you on your honor, Ralph, to tell me the truth. You may as well tell it, for I know a part of it already. Who is the person in Baltimore whose initials are 'E. P.'?"

The man started. How much did she know? Well, it would commit him to nothing to tell the truth about this one thing.

"'E. P.'?" he repeated, as if pondering. "Why—the only person I can think of in Baltimore with those initials is a Mrs. Price—Mrs. Evelyn Price."

The fingers on the keys did not falter in their regular performance of their duty. It takes little thought or concentration to play "Pop Goes the Weasel" over and over. Edith assimilated the bit of information she had received before she asked another question.

"What is her husband's first name?"

"I—I—think it is 'Ferdinand,'" Ralph said. He tried to speak lightly.

"Do you know Mrs. Price?" was the next question.

"I have met her—that is—yes, I know her," he stammered.

"And"—she hesitated only a moment—"Tom knows her, doesn't he?"

"I think he does," he admitted.

The girl looked at him so suddenly that for the second time he started nervously.

"Why not tell me the truth?" she demanded.

"Why shield Tom? He knows her, doesn't he?"

"Yes," the man muttered.

"And he has been with her in Baltimore, hasn't he?"

"Edith!" protested Ralph. "This is not fair!"

"No," she replied, "not fair to question you about him—nor is it necessary—for I know all about it."

She said no more, and her companion stood wondering. At last she raised her eyes again to him, and there was a hard glint in their brown depths.

"People are saying that I am engaged to Tom," she hurried on, "and that he has not cared to be here to-night. I am not engaged to him—do you hear? I want you to say that to anyone who will listen to it. That's all I ask of you."

The dance was ended, and she played the final notes of the reel with a dash and abandon that brought a round of applause from the breath-

less and panting dancers. Then, as she rose from the piano stool, she quickly drew the telegram from her dress and slipped it into Ralph's hand.

"Read that!" she ordered. "It was telegraphed to your house; your mother telephoned it over. Now you will understand how I know."

A moment later she was out in the hall, jesting with her father and mother, and telling them that they were the "youngest-looking couple in the entire dance."

## *Chapter Seven*

Ralph Morton remained standing by the piano after Edith had left him. His back was turned to the hall where the guests and hosts were chatting merrily. Unfolding the message the girl had handed him, he read and re-read it. He was mortified when he noticed that his hand trembled as he held the slip of paper.

“Your cousin brought money. F. saw him. Thinks it was you. Be on your guard.  
“E. P.”

And Edith had seen this! He gasped in consternation as he appreciated this, then sighed with relief as he recalled their recent conversation. How fortunate that he had spoken the truth! He had acknowledged that “E. P.” was Mrs. Evelyn Price, and that he knew her; that her husband’s name was Ferdinand.

What else had Edith asked him? Oh, yes—if Tom knew Mrs. Price. He did not blame himself for acknowledging that Tom did know

her. How could he have been truthful and said otherwise?

The laughing and talking in the hall broke in upon his musings. He felt, as Edith had felt less than an hour ago, that he must get away from all these people for a while. Glancing down the room, he saw that one of the long French windows at the rear, opening upon the veranda, was open. He strolled toward it and stepped from the brilliantly lighted interior out into the dusk of the spring night.

The back veranda faced the orchard, and the soft wind wafted to him the odor of the blossoming fruit trees. The moonlight flooded the lawns and made the place look like fairyland.

Even Ralph Morton, absorbed as he was in thoughts of himself and his own schemes, paused to draw in a long breath of sweetness and to note the beauty of the night. Going down the steps, he began to walk up and down the asphalted path leading out toward the garage. Here, at least, he could be quiet and think.

He had read the telegram twice, and now repeated to himself every phrase of it. He must be sure of the explanation he was to give to

Edith. What about the money? How could he explain the clause about that? How could he tell her that he had borrowed it from Mrs. Price and sent Tom to return it?

An idea flashed upon him so suddenly that he came to an abrupt standstill. Mrs. Price had not intimated that the money had come from him. She had simply said that his cousin had brought the money. Moreover, the money was not his, but Tom's—for he (Ralph) had not had the money to pay the debt, so Tom had supplied it.

But what reason could he give for Evelyn's word of caution to himself? Well, he could suggest that as Mr. Price knew neither of the cousins, and had heard his wife speak of having met Ralph, he had jumped to the conclusion that Tom was Ralph. He need tell only what was necessary. He could even claim that he had no right to pry into Tom's affairs. Edith would be too proud to ask many questions. Her imagination would supply details which he might seem to hesitate to give. The nature of the case would make her shrink from too close investigation, and she would attribute any silence on his part to loyalty to Tom.

Loyalty to Tom! For a moment he felt a slight qualm of conscience. Then he quieted it with a hot indignation at Tom's having bungled the whole affair, as he evidently had done. What a blunderer Tom was! A boy of fifteen could have managed the matter better! Ralph Morton simulated and stimulated resentment and indignation until he made himself believe that he felt both.

J. Macdougall Hay speaks of conscience as the handcuff to bind men to God. Sometimes men use self-deception or self-justification as a key to unlock the handcuff. Ralph Morton had little trouble in doing this. He had used the key so often that he found it easy to insert it into the lock for which he needed it to-night.

With a thrill of self-congratulation he turned and started toward the house. Entering by the window by which he had gone out, he traversed the drawing room and reached the hall as the guests were making a move toward departure. Several motor cars were drawn up in front of the house. The girls were starting up to the dressing room to don their wraps.

"I have just been out in the garden for a few puffs at a cigarette," Ralph remarked to his

host. "It is a heavenly night." Perhaps someone had seen him go out. It was well to tell the truth when one could do so with safety.

"Indeed, it is a fine night," remarked Mr. Hale, looking out of the open front door. "There is a glorious moon," he called back as he stepped out upon the porch. "You fellows inside are missing it."

All the men except Ralph followed him. Edith spoke to Constance in a low voice: "Will you go upstairs to the dressing room with the girls?" she asked. "If so, I will stay down here."

"Certainly," agreed Constance, joining the group on the stairs.

Mrs. Hale had gone to the rear of the house to give some forgotten order for the morning, and Ralph and Edith were thus left alone. The girl laid a trembling hand on the man's arm.

"You read the telegram?" she asked.

He covered her hand with his own, holding hers close. "Yes, dear," he replied. "I am sorry you should have seen it."

"I am not," she said. "I knew there were men—who were not good—and that there were women like the one that——"

She paused, covering her eyes with her free hand. "Oh," she shuddered, "such things make me hate life!"

"But, Edith," he suggested, "you don't understand the telegram."

She dropped her hand from her eyes and faced him, her lips trembling.

"Listen," she said, trying to steady her voice, "I understand enough to know that Tom has done something about which I don't want to hear; that he used your name for a shield, and that the—the woman—even though she is bad, warned you of this. Probably she and Tom have quarreled—perhaps because of his engagement. Perhaps he has tried to buy her off. Oh"—snatching her hand from his clasp, and twisting her fingers together in an agony of mortification—"the shame of it all! That I should have trusted him! What will the people who are saying that I am engaged to him think now if they learn——"

She paused, for the girls were coming along the upper hall toward the stairs.

"Why not let them think," the man said hurriedly and softly, "that you are engaged to *me*? Why not, darling?"

When the significance of Ralph Morton's unexpected proposition broke upon Edith Hale's mind, all the color left her face.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

He glanced apprehensively toward the staircase, but the girls had paused in the upper hall to wait for one of their group. He heard one of them call out, "Come along, Emily! We're waiting for you," and the reply: "I'm coming in a minute—just as soon as I can arrange this pesky scarf over my head!"

Ralph spoke hurriedly: "I mean that I love you, Edith. You know I do. You may not think you love me, but I will be willing to wait until you do. I cannot expect that you care for me yet as much as you have cared for Tom."

He had chosen his words cleverly, and the girl threw back her head with a disdainful gesture. "Tom!" she exclaimed. "I never want to hear his name again! I never loved him, although I was so foolish as to think I did. Now I hate him!"

"You don't hate *me*, dear," Ralph reminded her. "Give me a trial, Edith. I don't ask you to love me now. You may banish me later if

you like. But, dearest, I love you so much that I want to put myself at your service. If people are gossiping about your engagement to Tom, say you are engaged to me."

"But I'm not!" she whispered tremulously.

"You are if you say you are," he urged.

"You can break your engagement as soon as you want to, and have it known that *you* broke it. But, dear, use me as a shield now."

She caught her breath sharply. "As Tom did!" she sneered.

"Edith!" the man exclaimed. "Do not put yourself in such a category! No, not as Tom did, but as you, the woman I love, have a right to do—to honor me by shielding yourself from gossip by using my name."

"How good you are!" she said.

The girls were coming to the head of the stairs. He held her hands in his for a moment. "Will you be engaged to me, darling?" he asked eagerly.

His face was white, his eyes burning. Her own eyes fell before his gaze. "Yes," she whispered.

He raised her hands to his lips. Nor did he hurry the action. All need of haste was past

now. He did not care if he and Edith were seen in their present attitude. "Darling!" he murmured.

Beatrice Craig, leading the bevy of girls coming down from the dressing room, stopped short on the stairs.

"Oh," she exclaimed, with a giggle, "I fear we intrude!"

Edith snatched her hands from Ralph's grasp, a flood of crimson color flowing over her face and neck. Beatrice ran swiftly down the stairs and threw her arms about the blushing girl, laughing loudly as she did so.

"Oh!" she gushed. "You need not look so ashamed—even if you have surprised us all! I thought all the time that it was Tom! Now I understand why he was not here to-night."

"Hush!" Edith begged, glancing nervously at the others, who had heard only a part of Beatrice's speech.

Beatrice lowered her voice, but repeated her remark: "I thought it was Tom—and so did everybody else!"

"Well, you see," said Edith gravely, "everybody was mistaken."

The gossip held out her hand to Ralph. "My warmest congratulations!" she giggled.

"Please, Beatrice," Edith pleaded, "don't talk about it now!"

"What's all this secrecy about?" the other girls demanded teasingly, gathering about Edith and Ralph.

"About nothing!" Edith declared, pulling away from them and running to the front door. Here she paused and looked back, her face suddenly serious. "If you girls are my friends," she said in tense tones, "you won't ask me any more questions."

"All right!" Beatrice agreed, while those who had not fully comprehended the situation looked puzzled. Before further comment could be made, Edith had stepped out upon the veranda, calling gayly:

"Where are you ungallant men when your ladies are waiting here for you to escort them home?"

"We're all coming in now," Mr. Hale answered from the end of the veranda. "We've just been gazing at the old moon up there."

He was standing near his daughter when Beatrice Craig bade her good-night. "It's been

a lovely affair, Edith," she said, "and I do hope you are always going to be as happy as you are to-night."

"Thank you!" Edith rejoined faintly.

"And, as for *you*," Beatrice said, turning to Ralph, "you are a mighty lucky man!"

John Hale started violently. He stepped forward, as if to speak, then checked himself. Edith, noting this, acted quickly. It would not do for Ralph to be here when her father asked her the question that she knew would be sure to come.

"Ralph," she suggested, "I wish you would take Beatrice home. I don't like her to go alone."

"But," protested Emily Bruce, one of the guests, "as Beatrice is spending the night with me, I am going to take her in my motor."

"Nevertheless, Miss Bruce," Ralph interposed, "there is no reason why I should not ride with you two young ladies to your destination."

The last guest had gone, and Edith turned to Constance as she entered the house. "Connie," she said, "I'm going to bed. I'm fearfully tired."

"Yes, dearie, do go to bed," Mrs. Hale urged.

John Hale looked into his daughter's eyes as she returned his good-night kiss. "Child," he asked, "what did Miss Craig mean by her speech to you just now? Does she know that you are engaged to Tom?"

The girl flung out her arms with a movement of passionate weariness.

"No!" she exclaimed. "Because I am *not* engaged to Tom—and—you may as well know it now—I am engaged to Ralph Morton!"

It was well on toward morning, and Constance Medford was not asleep. Indeed, she had not gone to bed until after two o'clock. Now, lying in the dusky room, she went over in her mind the events of the past two hours. All the evening she had been vaguely uneasy, and, in spite of the fact that she had told herself that she was foolishly anxious, she had not been able to free herself of the consciousness that Edith was unhappy and that Ralph was watching her. She, Constance, was scarcely surprised by the glimpse she had of the pair as she and the other girls came in sight of the lower hall in descending from the dressing

room. She had not joined in the exclamations with which Beatrice Craig had called attention to the tableau. Her very heart was sick, for she remembered Tom Morton.

And through the painful scene that followed the departure of the guests she had remembered him. John Hale had not been harsh with his daughter, but he was pale and shaken as Edith repeated the telegraphed message that had come for Ralph.

"I cannot believe that Tom can have done anything dishonorable," the father had declared, when the girl voiced her doubts. "Just because he has been detained by unexpected business is no reason for suspecting the man who loves you."

There was a look of reproach in his kind eyes, and Edith saw it. It may have been this that moved her to tell him of the telegram. She flushed and stammered in doing this, and John Hale stood stunned and silent as she talked.

"I don't understand it," he muttered at last. "Have you that telegram now?"

"No, father," she replied. "I gave it to—Ralph. It was his."

Here Mrs. Hale had broken in upon the con-

versation with a query that was so characteristic of her gentle and romantic temperament that Constance, even in her distress, almost smiled.

"Edith, darling," the mother had asked, "the only really important thing is—Do you love Ralph? For, of course, you must love him dearly to be engaged to him."

The girl looked at her mother dully. "I don't know," she said slowly, "whether I love him much or not. But I don't love Tom any more. And Tom doesn't love me—and Ralph does."

"But Tom *does* love you!" exclaimed the mother. "And he is such a dear, good man!"

"Good!" Edith ejaculated scornfully. "Would a good man have paid money to a married woman, and, when her husband saw him, pretend that he was another person, and that person his own cousin and friend? Is that being good? If so, Heaven deliver me from good men!"

She sprang to her feet, and began to walk up and down the room, her hands clenched.

"Dear," her father said, "I know all this looks very black, but until I see the telegram myself I cannot believe that there is not some mistake. Perhaps Ralph's mother did not get

the message straight. I must have him go to the office and bring me the original."

The girl shuddered. "Oh, daddy," she wailed, "what is the use of raking up all this horrible, disgusting Baltimore affair! Isn't it bad enough as it is?"

But her father was firm. He would sift this matter out, and she must let him tell her all that he learned. It was a serious thing, he said, to condemn a man unheard. Tom should have a chance to speak for himself, to explain his actions.

As she listened, Constance found her heart warming more than ever to her uncle. He knew Tom, he appreciated how impossible it would be for a man like Tom Morton to be guilty of the evil of which he was accused, of which Ralph had allowed him to be accused. Her anger rose as she appreciated Ralph's attitude in this matter. How dared he take advantage of Tom's absence and of Edith's misery to make love to the girl?

Mrs. Hale went to her child and put her arms about her. "Darling," she pleaded, "come upstairs with me and go to bed!"

Without another word, Edith obeyed, and

John Hale and his wife's niece were left downstairs alone. As the perplexed father turned to his companion he noted her clear gray eyes, her clean-cut, intellectual profile, and drew a breath that sounded like an expression of relief.

"What do *you* think, girlie?" he asked.

She answered him frankly: "I don't know just what to think, uncle. But there is one thing I am sure of: Tom Morton is a good man."

John Hale held out his hand to her. "Thank you!" he said simply. "You are a great comfort to me, child. I don't want my little girl to marry Ralph Morton. I don't entirely"—he hesitated, then continued—"I don't entirely approve of him, though, of course, he is only what any spoiled son of a widowed mother might be."

Lying awake now, she remembered his pause. Was he going to say: "I do not entirely trust him," and had checked himself? If so, he and Constance felt alike.

She had spoken nothing of this when her cousin asked her to come and sit by her for a while. "I think I can sleep," Edith said, "if

you sit here on the bed by me and stroke my forehead."

So for an hour Constance Medford sat stroking the nervous sufferer's forehead. At last, when the longed-for sleep had come to the daughter of the house, the orphan crept off to her own room and to bed. But the last thing she did before she slept was to kneel down and send up a little prayer for Tom. She wished that he, in his lonely apartment in New York, could know that she was thinking of him and trusting him. Then, as she found herself wishing this, she blushed in the dark and called herself a silly fool who was meddling in something that was none of her business.

She tried to believe that it was only interest in her cousin that made her so sorry for Tom Morton.

## *Chapter Eight*

Ralph Morton would have denied the accusation that he was past master in the art of self-deception. Indeed, he had reached the point where he was so completely self-deceived that it was not difficult for him to believe that he dealt honestly with himself. Therefore, he had not acknowledged to his own soul that his feeling for Edith was partly admiration of her beauty, and affection of a sort, mingled with a desire for the good things of this world for which she stood. Yet away back in his mind was always the consciousness that she was the only child of a rich man.

When Tom had told Ralph of his engagement, the younger man had congratulated his cousin, but later he had smiled cynically in remembering that "Tom had been foxy enough to feather his own nest well." The mixed metaphor did not disturb him. He was thinking of what he considered Tom's inconsistencies—not his own.

So to-night, while he chatted with the two girls whom he was escorting home, he was

aware of a subtle feeling of triumph. He laughed at all the teasing remarks of his companions, although he refused with mock gravity to say anything about the bit of news of which Beatrice made much. Yet so merrily did he decline to discuss the subject that he left the girls in an uncertain state of mind as to just how much was true with regard to his engagement to Edith and whether or not they might pass on the interesting bit of information.

When they reached the Bruce house Ralph Morton sprang out of the automobile and assisted his companions to alight; then, after escorting them up the steps to the front door, held out his hand to say good-night.

"But," Emily Bruce protested, "you must let my man take you home, Mr. Morton. You are a mile away from your own house."

"Thank you ever so much," he replied, "but really I want to take a walk in this wonderful moonlight. I shall sleep better for doing so."

He was glad to be alone again as he strode along the asphalted road stretching between the Bruce estate and his mother's place. He had much to think of. He could hardly believe in his own good fortune. Here, after all these

years in which he had thought of marriage with Edith Hale as the culmination of his dreams of happiness and comfort—years which had brought about at last the engagement of his cousin to the woman for whom he—Ralph—longed—here he was at last the betrothed of the one girl in all the world whom he wished to marry!

Had not Fate played into his hand, and had he not played his own cards well?

The figure reminded him with a disagreeable jar of his last game of cards; of the money he had lost and of Tom's having paid his debt for him. The reminder was not an agreeable one, and he determined that he would refund that money at once.

He gnawed the end of his mustache as he considered how little ready money he had at his command. His mother, though an invalid, had never laid down the reins of power. She was not rich, and while she was perfectly willing to give Ralph such funds as he told her he needed, she would not let him manage her moderate income. She did not live extravagantly herself, yet she had brought up her son in comfort and luxury.

John Hale had been right in saying that Ralph "played at law." There was always some excuse for his not working hard—an excuse which his fond parent was ever ready to accept, for she liked to keep her boy at home and near her. She had given him, last year, an automobile runabout, and since he had owned this he had gone to his office more seldom than before. When he expressed a wish for anything, she would ask him what it would cost, then give him the money with which to buy it, but except upon the many occasions when he named larger sums than he needed, he had no money of his own. That he did not hesitate to sacrifice truth when talking to his mother was due the fact that he sometimes had funds to spend in ways of which she would have disapproved.

To have money doled out to him as he needs it by any woman—be she mother or wife—weakens the ambition and lessens the self-respect of any man unless he be exceptionally strong and independent. Ralph Morton had reached the deplorable state where he did not object to receiving money from his mother, but accepted it as his due. Would it not all come

to him, anyway, when she died? Therefore he felt under no especial obligations to her. She was only giving him in advance a bit of that which would some time be altogether his own.

Now, walking along the deserted streets of Homewood, he appreciated that if he was to pay his financial debt to Tom Morton he must invent some plausible tale to tell his mother. He was pretty sure that he could trust his ready wits to prompt him along this line.

First of all, he would surprise her by the announcement of his engagement to Edith. He knew, of course, that she would be pleased. He was glad to think of this. It made him feel self-satisfied to reflect that through him a joy was coming into her life. He found himself eager to talk the matter over with her, and quickened his pace to reach home sooner. He noticed with a thrill of pleasurable anticipation as he turned in at his gate that there was a light still burning in his mother's room. She often lay in bed and read until toward midnight. She evidently had been doing this to-night, and was, therefore, awake. Perhaps she had been hoping he would come home in time to talk with her before he slept.

Fitting his key into the latch, he entered the house and closed the door softly behind him. But he had not been so quiet that his mother had not heard him.

"Darling!" she called from her room.

"Yes, mother!" he called back blithely.

"I'm awake and waiting for you," she said.

"Come on upstairs, dearest."

Ralph ran lightly up the stairs and paused in the door of his mother's room. Mrs. Morton was in bed, propped up among her pillows, and she greeted her son with a smile.

"You haven't been lying awake worrying about me, I hope," Ralph said.

Then he bent down and kissed her, glancing approvingly at the pretty boudoir jacket she wore over her night dress and at the cap with ribbons to match the jacket.

"Gee! how sweet you look all frilled up!" he exclaimed. "But you always do look dainty and pretty, dear mother mine!"

A thrill of joy brought color to the woman's pale cheeks. It was by such comments and phrases as these that Ralph Morton made his mother ignore his lack of some of the sterner virtues. He was all she had, and, like other

mothers of sons, she expanded and glowed under his expressions of admiration and affection. Many a man cajoles his mother by such tactics when he would not sacrifice his selfish indulgence to buy her happiness. One is sometimes forced to the conclusion that the proverbial blindness of a girl with her sweetheart is surpassed by the credulity of a mother with her only son. What his life is she forgives when he lavishes a few easy caresses and endearing epithets upon her. So to-night there was a light of happiness in the invalid's eyes as her son took his seat by her side and held her hand in his.

"Tell me about the dinner," she urged. "I stayed awake to hear all about it. Was there any announcement of Edith's engagement to Tom?"

Ralph hesitated, and his voice trembled when he replied. "There was an intimation that she is engaged. But not to Tom, mother. Guess to whom!"

Her eyes widened as she looked into his face. "You don't mean," she gasped—"not to——"

"Yes!" he interrupted, laughing excitedly, "I do mean just that, mother mine—to me—*me*

—the man who has loved her all these years! Oh, my dear, I can't believe in my own good fortune!"

"Thank God!" his mother breathed. "She is a sweet girl, Ralph." She paused, musing a moment before she spoke again. "And to think it is you she loves, and not Tom!" she said at last. "Oh, my boy, I am so glad! Tell me all about it."

The pair talked for an hour, Ralph giving his own version of the affair. Of course, he said, Edith must have cared for him all along, or she would not have been suspicious of Tom's absence from home. Ralph preferred, he averred, not to go too deeply into that matter, for he was sorry for poor old Tom, whom he was fond of in spite of some things that were hard to explain.

And then, tactfully, he intimated that under the circumstances he would like to hand over a little money to Tom—to settle a small business transaction between himself and his cousin—and if his mother did not mind he would rather not particularize about this, either. It would not be quite fair to Tom to do so. But now that he, Ralph, was so happy it was only natural

that he should long to do the square thing by Tom.

His mother praised him for this feeling, and loved him the better for it. Yet why should Tom, who had a good business, need money? Still, she would ask no questions, since Ralph urged her not to. She would give him a check for the sum he suggested. He was always her dear, fine, noble son!

Ralph Morton's mother had told him this so often that he was almost convinced that he was all she declared him to be.

It was when he was on his feet, telling her good-night, that she spoke out the thought that had been in her mind, as it had been in Ralph's, during all their conversation. She expressed it gently, hesitatingly:

"Yes, as I said, Edith is a sweet girl. And, darling, it gives me a sensation of peace to remember that she is not a poor girl. It is so hard for young people to begin life without a margin to work on."

"For her sake, I am glad she has money," Ralph admitted. "Although, I assure you, mother, the thought of her father's wealth has not entered my mind. I should love her and

long to marry her if she were penniless. Of course I would never touch a cent of her money anyway."

"Of course not," rejoined the mother.

Parent and son told themselves that they were speaking the truth. Yet in the heart of each was the consciousness—though unacknowledged—that neither was really deceiving the other. It is sometimes easier to deceive one's self than the person with whom one is talking.

Still, Mrs. Morton was certain that Ralph was a dear, self-sacrificing fellow, who was trying to get Tom out of some scrape into which he had been led through lack of principle. It was too bad that Tom had not a stronger will. What could he have done to be in such need of ready money? Well, it was none of her business, and Ralph had requested her not to pry into the affair. She would do as he said—he was so good. She was glad that poor, erring Tom had no mother to grieve over him.

As she fell asleep there was on her lips the prayer uttered by many another mother of an only son—a prayer constructed along the lines of the Pharisaical exclamation quoted two

thousand years ago: "Lord, I thank Thee that *my* son is not as other sons are!"

There was no prayer on Ralph Morton's lips that night, but instead there was a smile of self-satisfaction. Things were at last coming his way!

Down in New York, Tom Morton was striving to forget his worries in slumber. He would surely get a letter from Edith in the morning.

"Of course she will trust me," he muttered.

Then memory of the vexation she had felt when he last telephoned her stabbed him. All girls were inclined to be suspicious, he supposed. Suddenly, as if in refutation of his cynical supposition, there arose before his mind's eye the face of Constance Medford—the sweet, yet firm mouth, the grave, earnest eyes, the waves of soft brown hair, and he was ashamed of his pessimism. The thought of her calmed him, and he found himself floating off into the land of dreams.

So, after all, Constance was his last waking thought on this May night, as he was hers. Perhaps there is more in telepathy than some scoffers acknowledge.

## *Chapter Nine*

“It’s all de mail what’s came, suh.”

Washington, Tom Morton’s nineteen-year-old colored boy-of-all-work, said the words regretfully as he laid sundry uninteresting-looking envelopes beside his master’s plate at the breakfast table. Tom spoke with an indifference which he was far from feeling.

“That’s all right, Wash. Bring in my coffee, please.”

The colored boy shook his head as he went into the tiny kitchen and poured out the steaming beverage. “I’m right sartain,” he mused, “dat Mr. Mo’ton ain’t ben goin’ out to dat Homewood place so much all dese weeks jest for de good ob his hailth. An’ I sure did ’spect dat dere would be a letter in a lady’s han’-writin’ fur him dis mornin’. I’m mighty sorry dare ain’t!”

When alone, Washington allowed himself liberty of thought and whispered mutterings in the dialect of his race. When, however, he spoke to a white person, he aped the bearing

and language of his master in a way that brought a smile to the lips of that master's friends. The negro is a marvelous mimic and copies the manners of a beloved employer with an ease and enjoyment that are amusing.

This lad was genuinely fond of Tom Morton, and served him faithfully. He had an easy berth, and he knew it. He likewise rejoiced with great rejoicing in the cast-off ties and clothing that reverted to him. His only criticism of "Mr. Mo'ton's taste" was that his neckties and vests were "too quiet-colored."

This morning he was much concerned over the fact that his master seemed more thoughtful than usual and had even forgotten to comment on the excellency of the omelet, which was a golden puff to the eyes and delectable to the palate. Was it business or love that was interfering with his employer's appetite? he wondered. At last, he summoned courage to express his solicitude.

" 'Scuse me, suh," he said respectfully, as Tom folded his napkin and arose from his chair, "but I hope you are not feelin' poorly this mornin'. You don't seem to have no appetite, suh."

Tom smiled kindly. "I am feeling perfectly well, thank you, Wash," he assured his attendant. "But I had a tiresome journey yesterday, and I did not sleep until late last night—so perhaps I am not quite as hungry as usual. A brisk walk will set me up all right."

"Are you dinin' at home this evenin', suh?" asked the servant.

Morton hesitated. He longed to be able to say that he would not be at home, for that would mean that Edith had summoned him to Homewood.

"No—yes—that is—I don't know yet," he replied vaguely. "Much depends on what mail I find at my office. I'll phone you later in the day and tell you."

"Yes, suh."

"And, Wash, if any message comes for me, be sure to call me up and deliver it just as you receive it. Understand?"

"Yes, suh. Good mornin', suh!"

The sunshine of yesterday had given way to a raw mist that made Tom shiver slightly as he reached the street. It was not the kind of weather to tempt one to take the brisk walk of which he had just spoken, and he pretended that

this was the reason that he turned his steps immediately toward the subway station.

In reality, he knew that he was hurrying down to his office in the hope that there he might find some communication from Edith. Perhaps she had written, addressing him there instead of at his apartment. Yet—she had never done that before.

He tried to read his newspaper on the train, holding the sheet in one hand and hanging on to the strap with the other, swaying backward and forward with scores of other men all going forth with the same aim at heart or in mind—that of making a living for themselves or for those dependent upon them.

It is a mighty army—this that throngs subway, elevated and surface cars morning and evening. We are so accustomed to seeing it that we are not as much interested in its personnel as in the soldiers who march in a holiday parade. But many of these unremarkable civilians are as valiant heroes as those who wear a national uniform, while the women who are crowded into conveyances with them may be as brave and self-sacrificing as the Florence Nightingales and Clara Bartons of the world.

The greatest fights of life, the greatest victories of the spirit, are not always fought and won on famous battlefields.

Tom Morton thought of this to-day as he found himself unable to fix his attention upon the paper he held. Looking about him, he wondered if in each of the lives of these people was some tender longing, some anxiety as great as his. Then he chided himself for comparing his comparatively comfortable life with the life of the poor man across the aisle from him, with face hard and cynical, clothes thin and worn.

Come to think of it, Tom reflected, the only real trouble that he himself had this morning was that he had not heard from the woman he loved. But he would hear from her when he reached the office.

Yet here, again, he was doomed to disappointment. Only business communications awaited him. When he had looked over these, he felt that he could stand this suspense no longer. Perhaps Edith was ill. Perhaps she had not received his telegram. Yet surely some one would have let him know!

A happy thought struck him. He would telephone to Ralph's office. To be sure, Ralph was

absent from his office so often that Tom wondered why he troubled his mother to pay the rent of the place. Yet it "looked better," the son insisted, "for a lawyer to have some business address."

The boy who served as Ralph's office boy and clerk answered Tom when he "rang up." No, the boy said, Mr. Morton had not been to the office for several days now—indeed, for almost a week. There was, therefore, no information to be gained from that quarter.

Tom Morton stood irresolute. Twice he started to call up the Hale house, then stopped. His pride made him shrink from forcing himself upon Edith's attention if she were trying to avoid him. Yet surely she was not doing that! He said this over and over to himself, then remembered that in spite of his letter to her, his two telegrams and his request that she send him a line, she had made no sign.

If there had been any accident, if she were too ill to write, Constance Medford would have written him. With the thought of Constance, his face lighted. Here was the way to learn the truth. He would telegraph her. Were he to telephone, somebody else might answer or she

might be out. A telegram would be sure to reach her.

Thus it came about that Constance, returning about 11 o'clock that morning from a music lesson she had been giving, met at the gate of her uncle's place a boy with a telegram bearing her name. She was glad that she had met the boy, because now she need not tell anybody that Tom had communicated with her—at least not until she had decided how best to answer his message.

In spite of her sympathy with him, she smiled, but then sighed as she thought of the various telegrams from and about him that had arrived during the past twenty-four hours and the change they had wrought in the condition of affairs. This message gave her a bit of a heart-ache:

“No word from Edith. Is she well? Shall I come?”

“T. M.”

Constance was conscious of an unwonted sense of impatience. It seemed such a wanton waste to be throwing away the love this man was offering her—and all because of pique.

How could Edith do it? And as Constance asked herself this question her own intuition answered it for her: Edith had not really loved Tom. Her vanity had been touched by his devotion; she knew that he was considered an eligible parti; he was good-looking and very much in love, and she had accepted him. But if she did not love Tom, neither did she love his handsomer cousin.

Constance found herself suddenly sorry for Edith. A strong nature is often sorry for a weaker one, for if the woman of shallow nature suffers less than does her deep-natured sister, she also enjoys less keenly. In pondering on this, Constance Medford's momentary impatience passed away, and she smiled brightly as the younger girl came out on the veranda to greet her.

"Hello, Connie!" Edith said. "It's a dreary kind of a day, isn't it? I never woke up until an hour ago. Ralph 'phoned me just now to ask if I cared to go for an auto ride, but I told him it was too damp."

"It certainly *is* damp," Constance agreed. "What are you going to do with yourself to-day?"

“Oh, I don’t know,” Edith complained. “I thought of going to town if the day were nice. Perhaps Ralph might ask me to go to the theater to-night—but dad has sent him word that he wants to talk with him after dinner. Oh, I’m tired of all this mess!”

As the two girls stood together, Constance noted that the look of weariness had passed from her cousin’s face since last evening. She marveled that she could so soon recover from the strain she had passed through, and found herself understanding why men fell in love with Edith’s vivid beauty and coloring. The dark brown eyes and hair seemed in some lights black and brought out the rich glow in her cheeks. Except when ill or very weary, Edith did not lose this glow. Constance, with her clear-cut, classic features, gray eyes, soft brown hair and fair skin, seemed almost fragile when compared to her brilliantly pretty companion.

Yet thoughtful people often looked longer and with more lasting pleasure at the older girl. Her face had a sweet pensiveness that made it attractive. Now her whole expression softened as she spoke to her cousin, laying a gentle hand on her arm.

“Dear,” she said, “forgive me for asking—but have you sent any word to Tom?”

“No!” exclaimed Edith. “I just hate to! I don’t want to have anything more to do with him.”

“But, Edith,” the other pleaded, “some one ought to send him some word about the condition of affairs. He may come here to see you, you know.”

Edith gasped with consternation. “Goodness, so he might!” she agreed. “Oh, Connie—just to please me send him a line—won’t you? Tell him—yes—tell him I wish our engagement broken—that it *is* broken—that I have asked you to tell him. I told mother I was going to ask you to do this.”

“And what did she say?” queried Constance.

“That it was asking a great deal of you—and that I ought to do it myself. But I just can’t! Oh, Connie—I wasn’t going to tell you this, for I hate to talk about it—but mother tells me that as soon as father has had a talk with Ralph to-night he’s going to have a talk with Tom. But I want him—Tom, I mean—to know about things before dad sees him.”

"I will write a note to him," Constance promised gravely. "But you can tell uncle that I have done so. I won't do it clandestinely."

"Thank you, Connie!" the other said, a smile chasing away the frown that had just gathered on her forehead. "You are such a dear!"

"I can't telegraph him the whole truth," muttered Constance, as she seated herself at her desk. "I will put a special delivery stamp on this and catch the noon mail. He will get it this afternoon."

She was right, for it was not yet four o'clock when her letter was laid on Tom Morton's desk. He tore it open eagerly.

"Dear Tom," he read. "Do not come until you hear from uncle. Edith has changed her mind. Circumstances which have been hard for her to understand have made her consider her engagement to you a mistake. If you were only here, I could explain better—although all this is, of course, none of my business. I am sorry, Tom—more sorry than I can say.

"Your sincere friend,

"CONSTANCE MEDFORD."

The letter dropped to the floor, and the man

sat for a moment stunned and dazed. Then he sprang to his feet.

“And where is Ralph all this time?” he exclaimed, his face flushing angrily. “Where is Ralph?”

## *Chapter Ten*

Ralph Morton, contrary to all precedents of romance, had slept soundly. Consciousness of his own shortcomings was not one of his characteristics, and in this case any qualms that the remembrance of his perfidy might have caused him were wholly overcome by the thought of his triumph and by his proud mother's rapturous words of praise.

He was engaged to Edith, he told himself exultingly. He had won out against odds that would have discouraged a less persistent man. She was his, the girl he loved. The manner in which he had won her did not trouble him, nor did any scruples abate in the least the thrill of self-congratulation that possessed him when he considered his conquest.

It is doubtful if either that night or the following morning he gave more than a passing thought to Tom Morton after he had decided to pay—with his mother's money—the debt he owed his cousin.

It was too damp, he declared, to go into town,

so after calling up Edith on the telephone and talking to her for a few minutes, he lounged about the house, smoking, stopping at his mother's door for an occasional affectionate word, and casting resentful glances at the gray and lowering day outside.

He had become terribly bored with himself and his present surroundings, and had just decided to invite Edith to go into town for some kind of "a show" to-night, when he was summoned to the telephone by Edith's father. Ralph answered him with a suddenly awakened sense of uneasiness.

The possibility of having to explain his own actions—and, worse than that, Tom's actions—to John Hale had for some reason not occurred to him. As he grasped the receiver, there flashed across his mind the idea that perhaps he had only now begun his fight for Edith.

"I am in the city, Ralph, and I called you up at your office," the older man began abruptly. "But I learned that you were not there."

"No," replied the other, "I didn't go into town this morning—it was such a rotten day."

"I imagined that was your reason for staying at home," observed John Hale dryly. "I am

sorry you did not come in. There is something that I wanted to talk to you about—something that cannot very well be discussed over the phone. Can you come to my house some time this evening?"

"Why—yes—I think I can," Ralph hesitated; "though I was planning to ask you and Mrs. Hale to let me take Edith into the city for the theater this evening. But that can, of course, be postponed."

"If Edith really wants to go, there is no necessity of a postponement," the father said. "I shall be at home at five this afternoon. Suppose you drop in and see me then."

"I shall be only too glad to," agreed Ralph with a cordiality which he was far from feeling.

"Very well," returned John Hale. "I shall expect you at five o'clock. I may as well tell you frankly beforehand, Ralph, that there are several things that puzzle me. I shall hope that a full explanation from you may clear them up. Good-by!"

"Good-by!" Ralph returned, forcing himself to speak pleasantly. But his face was white as he turned away from the telephone. Suddenly

he saw the depth of his deception and entanglement, and a sickening dread possessed him, driving all of his thoughts of triumph from his mind. For a moment even his self-justification deserted him.

How much did Mr. Hale know? How much did he suspect? These questions echoed again and again through his perturbed mind, torturing him like a physical pain. He had always been a little afraid of Edith's father. As far back as Ralph could remember, the sharp-eyed, clear-headed man of business seemed to understand him and his methods far better than the boy's own mother did. The accepted suitor appreciated now that the conference for which he had just arranged would be no mere formality. Mr. Hale would question him searchingly, nor would he accept evasive answers. If he was determined to know what had caused his daughter's change of mind, any apparent attempt on the part of the younger man to blind him to the truth would ruin his own hopes. Perhaps Edith's father had already had a talk with Tom Morton; he might even bring Tom home with him and make the younger cousin tell his story

before the man whom he had betrayed. The idea was most disconcerting.

Ralph Morton went to his own room and walked the floor for a long hour, smoking cigarette after cigarette, considering and rejecting innumerable excuses which he might offer in explanation. At last he paused before a photograph of Edith that stood on his mantel. It had been the girl's Christmas gift to his mother, and Ralph had confiscated it for his room.

"I'll lie, if I have to," he muttered; "I'll lie myself black in the face before I'll give you up! You're *mine*, now, and I'll fight for you to a finish. But I won't tell a lie that can be proved unless I have to. There is a way of using the truth to accomplish one's ends. And all's fair in love, anyway."

With this quotation of a truism which has been employed to cover and condone many a treachery and evil deed, he went downstairs, whistling softly. He had decided that the first weapon he would use would be a seeming truth. That was safer than a lie. But, if necessary, the lie would be called into requisition. He felt more at peace now with the world and himself. He had arranged his plan of campaign. Truth

and what seemed to be an honorable reserve would work wonders.

Later he called up Edith and asked her to go to the theater with him that night.

"I'd like to go," she said wistfully. "It's so dull here. But I'll have to ask father and mother first."

"Don't you bother about that," Ralph laughed happily. "I have already asked and received permission from your father to take you—and without a chaperon, too. You see, now that we're engaged, it's all right."

"I see," Edith murmured. "Thank you, Ralph."

"Thank *you*, Edith!" Ralph replied softly. The thought of being with her so soon again nerved him for the coming interview with her father.

When he entered the Hale library at five o'clock, he found the master of the house alone, and noted this fact with a throb of relief. For hours he had feared that Tom Morton might also be present at the interview. Since it was only Mr. Hale with whom he had to deal, he could speak with less constraint. Suddenly he felt very confident of the outcome of the conver-

sation, and smilingly held out his hand as his host rose to greet him.

“Good afternoon, Ralph,” said the older man, not unkindly. “Sit down. I am glad you came so promptly, for I want to have a talk with you.”

“I am glad that you do, sir,” Ralph replied. “For I also want to talk with you. I have felt all day that I must see you.”

Already he had assumed the part which he had determined to play. His real self seemed for the moment to be wholly detached from him—a prompter who, from somewhere in the wings of his consciousness, directed him in his rôle. Apart from a certain excitement, he felt more at his ease than he had done since Mr. Hale’s telephone message to him.

“I imagine that we want to confer about the same thing,” Edith’s father began, tugging reflectively at his gray mustache. “I am going to be very frank in my questions to you, and I want you to be as straightforward in replying to them. This is no time for reserves or mistaken loyalty. The responsibility which you took upon yourself last night in asking my

daughter to marry you should be considered before the possible claims of friendship."

"I fully appreciate that, sir," Ralph returned, with a quiet dignity. "What do you wish to ask me?"

"Do you know of any reason," demanded Mr. Hale, "why Tom Morton, your cousin and friend, should not marry my daughter?"

"One very excellent reason is that she is engaged to me and not to him," Ralph replied lightly.

A frown crossed the father's fine face at the flippant speech. "You are evading my question, Ralph," he accused. "Why did Tom Morton go to Baltimore?"

"He went on business, I believe," the other answered slowly.

"Do you know what the nature of the business was?"

The younger man hesitated for a moment, but his eyes met squarely the grave, estimating gaze of his questioner. It is a mistake to suppose that only the sincere person can look one directly in the eyes. When Ralph spoke there was a regretful note in his voice.

"I really don't see, Mr. Hale," he protested,

“why I should be put on the witness stand or be held accountable for Tom’s comings and goings. As far as I can see, my only offense has been that of loving your daughter. That certainly is no cause for this cross-examination concerning the doings of a man who is quite capable of speaking for himself. I would suggest, sir, that you ask Tom for an account of his stay in Baltimore. I do know that while there he paid, at my request, a debt of mine. Further than that, I cannot and will not say.”

A sudden flash of understanding lighted John Hale’s face. This, then, had been the money mentioned in the mysterious telegram to Ralph. He had learned to-day that the message as repeated to Edith by Ralph’s mother had been correct. Now he understood what it meant—at least to a certain extent.

But why had the sender cautioned Ralph to be careful, unless to warn him that Tom was not dealing honestly with him? Tom, whom he, John Hale, had always trusted and liked! He could not believe Tom to be untrustworthy.

The whole affair puzzled him and made him uneasy. Yet there had been a suggestion of reluctance to violate a confidence in the tone

with which Ralph had delivered himself of his last words and this was not lost upon Mr. Hale.

"I can hardly demand an explanation from Tom," the father said somberly. "No one—not even Edith—has brought any fixed charge against him. The only count on which I can prove that he is guilty is that of losing his train, and I am too old a commuter to hold that against him for long." He tried to laugh, but failed. "From what you and Edith have told me, it appears that my daughter has been over-suspicious of the lad, and that he and she have lost their keen interest in each other. I cannot go to him and confront him with such an indictment—especially when the child herself has become engaged to another man.

"I suppose it is our breathless modern life that is responsible for this kind of thing," he added, with a half smile. "We were slower in suspicions and in changing ideals when I was young."

"I do not want you to think, sir," Ralph interposed deprecatingly, "that I became engaged to Edith from any motive on her part except self-protection. I wish I could declare that she loves me—but she doesn't. I love her dearly.

I have loved her ever since I was a little chap. I hope she may learn to love me—all unworthy as I know myself to be. I cannot even flatter myself into fancying that she cares for me very deeply yet—but I pray that she may in time. Our engagement so far is one of form. She thought people had linked her name with Tom's and was distressed at the idea. I offered myself as a bulwark to shield her from gossip. I count myself honored that she accepted me. I hope you understand that."

"I do understand it, Ralph," said his companion with more cordiality than he had shown before. "I understand and appreciate it. This sudden turn of affairs has been a shock to my wife and me—but we feel kindly toward you, Ralph."

Thus the interview ended, and Ralph knew that his good luck had not forsaken him. A thrill of exultation ran through his being.

It stayed with him all the evening as he and Edith sat in the theater, and he appeared at his best—bright, pleasant, polished in manner. The pair were seated after the performance in the fashionable Broadway restaurant where Ralph had insisted that they go "for a bite be-

fore returning home," when Edith's smiling face paled suddenly.

"Let us go home, Ralph," she said breathlessly. "It's very late."

The man's eyes followed the direction that her frightened gaze had taken. Two men were seated at a table not far from them. One of them Ralph did not recognize. The other was Tom Morton. As they looked, Tom turned and saw them both.

Ralph, with the sudden—and he told himself unreasonable—dread of exposure heavy upon him, and Edith—eager to avoid what she feared would be a scene—hastened to leave the restaurant, shrinking from the steady gaze of Tom Morton as though linked by a common sin.

The man's fingers were clumsy with haste as he held the girl's cloak for her, and she whispered to him as she fastened the garment: "Come, let's get away from here! I'm afraid he will try to speak to me."

Without another glance in the direction of the table at which her late fiancé was seated the girl hurried from the room, Ralph following close behind her. In the foyer they paused for

a moment while Ralph got his coat and hat from the boy in attendance.

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Edith fervently, as Ralph, his coat over his arm and his hat in his hand, started with her toward the entrance.

The man gave a little embarrassed laugh, but his companion noted the beads of perspiration that had sprung out upon his forehead.

"There was no need of being frightened, my dear," he told her with a manner that he tried to make assured. "He certainly would not have spoken to you back in there with all those people present. He would not have cared to make a scene."

He stopped short, with an uncontrollable start of surprise. Tom Morton stood at his elbow, his face pale and almost wooden in its lack of expression. The new arrival did not notice Ralph by look or gesture, but addressed himself to Edith, speaking slowly and carefully.

"I have no desire to 'make a scene,' " he said, repeating with emphasis the sentence he had just heard Ralph use, "nor to ask for explanations here. It is scarcely the place for that kind of thing. I only followed you, Edith,

to ask you when we may meet and each hear what the other has to say."

There were several seconds of tense silence, while the girl glanced quickly from the tall figure on one side of her to the slighter and shorter form and nervous face of her escort. Then she spoke deliberately, turning to the latter.

"It is time we were going home, Ralph," she said, moving away.

Tom Morton laid a hand on her arm. She could feel that his fingers were quivering.

"I have a right to an explanation," he said. There was a ring as of steel in his low tones, though his face remained passionless.

A sudden color flamed in the girl's face, and with a swift gesture of repulsion she shrank from the speaker. Her dark eyes looked into his, scornfully, stormily.

"How dare you talk of demanding an explanation?" she asked, angrily. Her tone, too, was low, but every word was distinctly heard by the two men. "How dare you halt me in a public place and speak to me when you must know that I hate you? If there were to be any explanations, I would be the one to ask for

them. I waive that right. I do not want ever to see you again. This is the last insult that I will endure from you!"

Tom Morton did not flinch from the blast of her wrath. He stood motionless after releasing her, his hands clasped behind him.

"I have already written to you, Edith," he remarked in an almost casual tone. "I think you will feel differently after reading my letter."

"I shall not read it!" she exclaimed, childishly. "I shall burn it—or return it to you—to prove that I have not read it."

Without another word she walked again toward the door. Tom's eyes followed her. It would have been difficult to read what his gaze held. Then he looked at Ralph, but the other man, refusing to meet his glance, hurried after his betrothed. He could look straight into John Hale's eyes this afternoon while acting a part, but he was not sure enough of himself to meet the accusing eyes of the man whom he had wronged.

It was not until Ralph Morton had piloted his car safely through the shifting current of city traffic that he spoke to the girl at his side.

"You were a little hard on Tom, I think, dear," he ventured.

"Can anybody be too hard on him now, after all that he has done?" she demanded angrily. "You, who know it all—in spite of your determination to shield him from the rest of us—should be the last one to plead with me to be gentle with him."

"We are not all of us saints," Ralph told her twenty minutes later. He had not spoken since her indignant exclamation, and they had crossed the ferry in silence and had now reached the top of the hill on the New Jersey side of the river.

"I, myself, have a confession to make to you. It is better to do it before our engagement goes further. All men are pretty much alike, I'm afraid, until they have some hope of being loved by the Only Girl. There was a time when I fell from grace myself. I shall not tell you her name. You do not know her. You never will know her. I was young and foolish and she was—well—neither! The thought of my sinful folly has tortured me during the past year. I had to confess it to you. I do not plead for mercy."

There are few things that make more for love and confidence than does an open and unsolicited confession of past errors. This man, in yielding weakly and as a precautionary measure to the impulse to confess, had made his companion feel that he was more noble than she had known. She sat thinking deeply after he had ceased speaking; then she turned and laid an impulsive hand on his arm.

"I am sorry it happened, Ralph," she whispered. "But I am glad and proud that you told me."

He, leaning toward her, bowed his head and kissed her for the first time.

A college friend of Tom's had unexpectedly remained overnight in New York, and the pair had attended the theater together, stopping in a restaurant on their way home.

Here Tom had excused himself long enough for his short interview with Edith. When he returned, so calm was his bearing that his guest took no further thought of the occurrence.

Ralph Morton was able to play a double part with some skill, but his cousin possessed poise and self-control of which Ralph was incapable.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Tom Morton's letter to Edith Hale had been sent on the impulse of the moment, as soon as he had received Constance Medford's note. He had felt that he could not endure another hour without asking the woman he loved to give him a chance to explain matters to her. To this end he had written urgently, perhaps more convincingly than he knew. With the dread of further delays, taught him by the circumstances of the past few days, he emulated Constance Medford's example and put upon his envelope a special delivery stamp.

The letter reached its destination during the evening and was laid by Constance upon Edith's dressing table. Here the white oblong caught the girl's eye as soon as she switched on the light in her room after parting from Ralph at the door of her home. She had paused, as was her custom, at her mother's room to say good-night, then had gone softly to her own chamber. She did not suspect that her cousin was lying awake hoping that Edith would come to

her with some news of Tom. Constance felt that she could sleep better if she knew that Tom was not as wretched as she feared.

But this whim—if whim it was—was not to be gratified, and she turned over with a sigh and closed her eyes. Once she thought she heard a door open and shut, but as there was no further sound she convinced herself that she had been mistaken and tried to think of other matters.

Meanwhile Edith looked at the envelope before her with a sneer of disgust. Perhaps there is no person stronger in her prejudices than the much-loved woman who is accustomed to having things her own way, and can, therefore, brook no crossing of her will. Tom had mortified her, had seemed not to care enough about her to be present upon the occasion of her dinner, had, she thought, been with some other woman. All of these misdemeanors made it hard for her to forgive him. A woman who loved more deeply, who had known more real suffering, would have trusted more, or would, at least, have given the offender an opportunity to explain himself. But wounded vanity, coupled with jealousy, forms a combination that even a strong and just man would find hard

to fight. And a pretty woman can be very vindictive to one who seems to forget her charm.

With a determination that did not falter, Edith picked up the letter, carried it to her desk, and, seating herself there, pulled off her long gloves, dropping them in her haste on the floor, seized an envelope, slipped Tom's unopened letter into this, and with a firm hand addressed it to the sender. Then, stamping it, she crept softly downstairs with it, and, in spite of the lateness of the hour and the darkness of midnight, ran down the garden walk and dropped the letter into the box at the gate. The front door slipped from her grasp as she was closing it upon her return and it was this sound that Constance heard. Had she suspected who had caused the noise and what her errand out-of-doors had been, she would have slept even less than she did that night.

Yet she was not to be kept long in ignorance of Edith's actions. After breakfast the following morning the two girls strolled out upon the broad veranda. The clouds of yesterday had been driven away by a brisk breeze and once more the world looked very beautiful. Mrs.

Hale came out through one of the long windows from the dining-room to chat about the plans for the day. She had asked Edith no questions, as her husband had suggested that "the child was best left alone until she could think matters over calmly." Nor had Edith volunteered any information beyond the brief fact of her engagement, which she had imparted on the night of the dinner. There was an atmosphere of suspense about them all, it seemed to Constance, and she found herself chafing against conditions. Again and again she reminded herself that the affair was no concern of hers, that she had no right to resent her cousin's plans, that it was ridiculous for her to make herself unhappy over the unfortunate circumstances. Yet she could not rid herself of a sense of depression.

It was, therefore, with a throb of gratitude that she heard Edith say, after her mother had gone back into the house:

"Sit down here by me, Connie. I want to talk to you. I've had a horrid time since I saw you yesterday."

At last, Constance thought, she would learn something of Tom's fate.

"Thank you," she said, obeying Edith's motion for her to take a seat on the broad wicker divan. "I am sorry you have had a horrid time, dear."

"I know you are," Edith affirmed. "And that is why I want to talk to you and tell you what has happened."

Finding it rather agreeable to pour forth her grievance to a sympathetic listener, Edith gave a graphic account of the encounter of last evening, repeating with evident enjoyment her scathing replies to Tom's appeal. So absorbed was she in her story that she did not see the stern look that was changing Constance's naturally curving lips to a hard line. Finally, the narrator told of the letter she had found on her table.

"I laid it there," Constance said briefly.

"I supposed it was you," remarked Edith. "I was so angry at Tom's daring to write to me that I actually was not a bit afraid to run all the way down to the gate and mail his letter to him unopened. He must have received it this morning."

To her astonishment, her companion uttered an exclamation of mingled horror and compas-

sion. Her eyes were wide and dark, her face pale.

"And that," Constance accused, "*that* is the way you treated an honorable gentleman!"

"Connie!" gasped the girl. "What do you mean?"

Constance had risen to her feet. Her cousin had never before suspected the existence of the temper that now flashed forth.

"Mean!" she exclaimed. "I mean that you have been cruel, unjust—both you and Ralph—and that you, a girl who is supposed to be capable of tenderness, have trampled under foot the love of a good and honorable man! Oh, I know you don't trust him"—as Edith tried to check her—"but that is nothing to be proud of! I should think you would be ashamed to acknowledge what you have done!"

She stopped with a quick catch in her breath, as if suddenly overwhelmed at the sound of her own tempestuous denunciation. Then, turning, she went swiftly into the house.

It was characteristic of Tom Morton that he should work a little harder than usual after receiving from Edith his own letter, unopened. Her action had hurt him cruelly. An instinctive

desire to dull by a counter-irritation the mental pain which he suffered drove him to his office and to hard, brain-absorbing labor.

He dared not trust himself to think just yet of Edith's rebuff. The girl he loved more than all else in the world had turned against him—how or why he did not know. Worse than that, she had deliberately insulted him, and he was not the type of man to bear such an affront meekly. His letter to Edith had been lying at his plate on the breakfast table, and, feeling his servant's eyes upon him, he had leisurely opened the outer envelope. Then, after a glance which showed him his own handwriting on the inner envelope, laid the letter down casually and pretended to busy himself with his morning repast. Tom Morton knew himself better than do most young men, and it was with the hope that he might later face his problem more calmly that he went to his office early to-day and immersed himself in the comparison and annotation of a pile of papers which his stenographer had laid on his desk.

He worked steadily and doggedly for some hours, pinning his thoughts down to the business of the day. At last, his task completed, he

swung himself around in his desk chair and spoke to the narrow-chested youth sitting at a typewriter at the other end of the room.

"Copy these notes, please, Harry," he ordered. "That job is finished at any rate."

"Finished!" exclaimed the other. "You are some worker, Mr. Morton!"

"I felt like working," rejoined Tom, smiling grimly. "I think I'll go out now and get some lunch."

"You must need it," his stenographer commented. "It's after 2 o'clock."

In the restaurant Tom gave his order, then sat silent, gazing somberly at the tablecloth in front of him. After a while he took from his pocket a sealed letter, looked at it thoughtfully for a moment and returned it to his pocket. His lips set themselves in a pale, thin line, and there had come to his usually kind eyes a hard gleam.

Anger—the cold, vindictive wrath of hurt pride—drove from his mind all softer emotions.

"Well," he muttered to himself, "it's all over with, of course. In a year I shall be glad, I imagine, that I found her out when I did. But it's hell now!"

He felt already that the episode was all but closed. One thing alone remained. He must see Ralph. His fingers tightened their grip on the edge of the table as he thought of this. He would make Ralph explain his part in the affair—if he had to choke the truth out of him.

He finished his lonely meal, scarcely knowing what he ate, and, leaving the restaurant, strolled down Broadway in the sunshine. He had gone only a block or two when he heard his name spoken and found himself face to face with Edith's father.

"Good afternoon, sir," Tom said coldly, pretending not to see the older man's outstretched hand. "Did you call me just now? I thought I heard you speak my name."

"I haven't seen you for some days, Tom," answered Mr. Hale mildly. "How are you, my boy?"

"It will probably be many more days before any member of the Hale family sees me again," Tom replied with a bitter laugh. "As far as my health is concerned, I am a little tired, but otherwise very well."

He turned to go on, but John Hale laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Come into my office for a few minutes, Tom," he commanded. "I want to talk to you."

"I am very busy," Morton demurred.

"You are not too busy to talk to an old man who has known you always and has always trusted you, Tom. Come along!"

Ten minutes later, seated in Mr. Hale's private office, Tom Morton drew a long breath and met the older man's eyes calmly.

"Fire away, Mr. Hale!" he said, with a half smile. "What do you want to say to me?"

"I'm worried," the other declared. "Worried about this tempest in a teapot between you and Edith. I shall not demand any explanation from my daughter, since she seems to have taken the management of the affair into her own hands, and evidently feels that her happiness depends upon being allowed to do this. Lord knows I want her to be happy! Still, if you could forget for a few minutes that I am Edith's father, and think of me simply as your friend and confidant, I should be very glad to hear what you have to say. It will go no further, unless you wish to have it do so."

"I have nothing to say," Tom answered de-

cidedly. "Your daughter can explain things much better than I can. She, at least, must have some shadow of a reason for her action. She has decided affairs for herself. I have no idea what has brought about the existing conditions."

"There must be something that led up to this break," Mr. Hale persisted. "You must have some suspicion of what it is. Why did you go to Baltimore, Tom?"

For a moment Tom did not answer. When he finally spoke his voice was stern and his face expressionless.

"Mr. Hale, I went to Baltimore about an affair that was not of my choosing or my concern. That is all I can tell you. You may think me bitter and stubborn. Perhaps you are right. Your daughter rebuffed me last night through no conscious fault of mine. I wrote to her yesterday giving a full account of my movements since I last saw her. That was while I still felt that I owed her an explanation. Here is my letter to her, returned to me unopened. Since she cares so little for me as to be indifferent as to whether I merit her suspicions or not, I do not care to explain further. This envelope

contains the one explanation I had to offer. It is the last I shall attempt to make."

Slowly he tore the letter across several times and flung it into the waste basket.

John Hale watched the scraps of the torn letter flutter down. His finely-lined, aristocratic face wore a peculiar expression. Finally he laughed whimsically.

"Well, of course, Tom," he said with his accustomed kindness, "if I can't get at the truth of this affair except by piecing together those bits of paper, I shall have to remain in ignorance." He paused. "Still," he added, more gravely, "I think you are making a mistake in not confiding in me. It is a rather distasteful thought to me that the love which I believed Edith had for you should be lost through a matter of foolish pride."

"It is not as if Edith still cared for me," Tom reminded him with quiet dignity. "You see, sir, she has shown me by her actions and I have received assurance by her own speech that she has no affection for me; even that she prefers not to know me. As long as I had the honor of being engaged to her, I owed her an explanation. But now, as a person whom she

does not desire to recognize, I feel no such responsibility incumbent upon me."

The girl's father seemed to study the pattern of his office rug for a long moment before raising his eyes and meeting Tom's gaze.

"I wonder if it would help matters at all," John Hale ventured, watching his companion's face keenly, "if I were to do all in my power to explain present conditions, and tell you that Edith is practically engaged to Ralph, your cousin?"

If he had expected the other to show some sudden emotion at this bit of news he was disappointed.

"Indeed?" Tom returned, his voice and manner unperturbed. "I had not heard of that."

An awkward silence ensued, then Tom rose to his feet.

"If there is nothing more that you wish to speak to me about, sir," he said with grave courtesy, "I will excuse myself. I am very busy to-day."

"No, there is nothing more," responded the other regretfully. "I had hoped that you would be able to explain this unfortunate condition, or at least that you would show a willing-

ness to do so. I see that I was mistaken. Good-by, my boy."

He held out his hand with the gentle, winning smile which his daughter had inherited from him, and which was one of her chief attractions. Tom's face softened.

"Please don't think too hard of me, Mr. Hale," he pleaded, somewhat huskily. "And let me tell you this much before I go. I do appreciate the straightforward way in which you have come to me, and I can say, with absolute frankness, that I know of no action of mine of which you or anyone whom you love need be ashamed. I hope never to do anything to forfeit your respect, sir—for your regard will always mean a great deal to me. That is all. Good-by, and thank you!"

He clasped warmly the outstretched hand, then left the office without a backward glance.

Downstairs, at the entrance to the great building, he stood for a moment and passed his hand across his forehead.

"Ralph is engaged to her!" he murmured. "Ralph! I must see him. I'll go to him now. He, at least, can explain, and he shall. I'll *make* him talk!"

There was no one but the clerk in his cousin's office. Mr. Morton was not in town. He had been here for a little while during the morning, but had left before luncheon. No, it was impossible to tell whether he would be in to-morrow or not. Was there any message?

"No," said Tom. Then, with a sigh of weariness or exasperation, he retraced his steps to his own office.

His stenographer looked up as he entered. "Your mail is on your desk, Mr. Morton," he said. "What's the matter, sir? You look done up this afternoon."

"I'm a little tired, I think," his employer replied, absently.

The western sunlight shining brightly on his desk brought into view a picture standing in the interior in a small ivory frame. Tom pushed it back into the shadow before taking up the sheaf of unopened envelopes which lay there. He shuffled over the letters, only half conscious of what he was doing. Then he started, suddenly awakened to an appreciation of the present. One of the envelopes was addressed to him in Ralph's well-known handwriting. A hard, gray shadow crossed Tom Morton's face

as he looked at it. Then he tore it open quickly.

Inside the envelope was a slip of pink paper—nothing more. It was a check for the amount Ralph had asked him to pay to Mrs. Price. Tom laid it away methodically in a drawer of his desk and sat silent for a time, watching the yellow bar of sunlight creep up his office wall.

Hate, elemental hate, took possession of him as he sat there; a desire for vengeance against the man who had stolen his love from him. He did not pause to consider whether he, Tom Morton, still loved Edith Hale or not. He only knew that he wanted to have Ralph before him, to meet him man to man, and square accounts.

He sprang to his feet, picking up his hat. "I'm going home, Harry," he remarked. "I've worked enough for to-day. Good afternoon."

His manner to Washington at dinner that night was such as to fill that worthy servitor's soul with apprehension lest his occasional and small "samplings" of the contents of humidor and cellarette had been suspected. Had the negro seen the expression on his employer's countenance when, after the meal was over, he sat down before his library desk, uneasiness would have changed to panic.



TOM SAT SILENT FOR A TIME WATCHING THE YELLOW BAR OF SUNLIGHT CREEP UP  
HIS OFFICE WALL



Yet this is all that Tom Morton wrote:

“My Dear Ralph: Please come to my office some time to-morrow afternoon. Your visit will save me a trip to Homewood.

“Yours truly,

“THOMAS MORTON.”

## *Chapter Twelve*

“Why so sad, fair lady?” Ralph Morton demanded teasingly.

He had driven his automobile close to the steps of the Hale home. Just above him stood Constance Medford, clipping the dried blossoms from a veranda box of plants. So absorbed did she appear to be in her task, or her own thoughts, that until he spoke she had betrayed no consciousness of Ralph’s presence. When he greeted her she lifted her head and looked at him coldly.

“Good morning!” she returned. “Edith will be down in a moment.”

She bent again over the flower box while the man watched her, half amused, half vexed. He had for some time suspected that this member of the Hale household disliked him. The fact that she wished to avoid him did not daunt him now. It was too bright a morning for one to be downcast, and he was progressing too favorably in Edith’s regards for him to be uncertain of his standing.

"But you haven't told me yet why you look so depressed," he persisted with an ingratiating smile.

But the smile was lost on Constance, for she continued her work without looking up.

"If I am depressed," she said, "you must place the blame on the world, not on me."

"But it seems like a pretty good old world to-day," Ralph protested. "It surely can't be as rotten as you seem to think it is, Constance."

"Oh, the world itself is all right," responded the girl, brushing the soil from her finger-tips. "But some of the people in it are very 'rotten,' as you phrase it."

Her eyes met his as she spoke and the man found himself slightly disconcerted by her grave gaze. To cover his embarrassment, he spoke unthinkingly.

"Present company is always excepted in that indictment, of course?" he rejoined inquiringly, still smiling.

"As you please," Constance replied. "There is an old maxim, with which you are doubtless familiar, about a guilty conscience needing no accuser. Whether it applies in this connection or not you know better than I."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand you, Constance," Ralph said with a ring of defiance in his voice.

She did not answer at once, but stood looking out over the sunny stretch of lawn. A robin scurried across the grass and her eyes followed it. The man watching her could not know that she was noting the beauty of the Spring morning and at the same time remembering how, in spite of all the lovely things in life, one man was sad and disappointed, and through no fault of his own. The remembrance of this gave her courage to speak out a part of what was in her mind as her eyes returned to her questioner's face.

"I'm afraid that you understand me only too well, Ralph," she said quietly. "I say 'afraid' because I love my cousin Edith, and also because on a morning like this I want to feel that all the world—all my world, at least—is clean and honest."

"And by that insinuation you mean what?" the man challenged angrily. This girl's veiled allusions spurred him on to learn the worst of her suspicions.

"Just what you think I mean," Constance

continued in a steady voice. "I do not believe that your hands are clean in this affair about Tom Morton—since you press me for further information. Nor do I believe that you have acted the part that an honorable man should act. I would not have said this of my own accord, Ralph, but since you insist upon questioning me, I must be honest."

The man flushed, then grew pale. "That is, please remember, only your personal opinion, dear lady," he parried with attempted lightness. "Of course you have a right to it, no matter how uncomplimentary it may be to me. I have known for some time that you disliked me—were working against me. But when you are older and wiser, you may not be so ready to make use of a woman's privilege of insulting a man, unpunished. Nevertheless," he concluded with a sudden outburst of resentment and rage, "I should like to see the man who would dare say such a thing to me!"

"If that is really your desire," Constance replied, her voice and lips quivering slightly, "why not call on Tom, Ralph? He would perhaps be less polite in his speech than I have been, but he is a man and a strong man. You

would have no compunction with regard to sex to keep you from avenging the 'insult' then. Why not go to see him, Ralph?" she mocked. "He might be grateful for the chance of talking to you face to face."

Her companion's eyes showed an evil gleam as he gave a short, ugly laugh.

"Facts speak for more than childish suspicions," he retorted. "Tom has nobody but himself to blame for what has occurred. If you knew where he was on the night of Edith's engagement dinner you might not be so violent in your espousal of his cause."

The girl was frightened at the sudden spasm of wrath that gripped her. She felt her hands close upon each other, while red spots flashed before her eyes. She heard her own voice as if it were the voice of another person.

"You know that's a lie, Ralph Morton!" she exclaimed, her face as white as the morning gown she wore.

Before Ralph could reply, the front door opened and Edith Hale hurried out upon the veranda, dressed for automobiling.

"Hello!" Ralph greeted her with a relieved laugh, alighting from the car and running up

the steps to meet her. "I'm glad you've come, for Constance and I have just been wrangling shockingly."

So natural was his manner that his fiancée smiled at what she thought was his jest.

"Constance got awfully angry with me, too, a while ago—but I guess she's gotten over it—haven't you, Connie?"

But Ralph did not allow Edith to wait long enough to hear her cousin's reply, or to see the agitated face bent over the plants, but lifted the girl bodily into the car, then sprang in beside her.

"Good-by, Constance," he called back tauntingly, as the car rolled down the drive. But Constance Medford did not raise her head.

Even after the car bearing Ralph and Edith had disappeared around the turn of the road Constance remained where the pair had left her, battling to regain her self-control. When she had forced back the tears that threatened to rise to her eyes, and steadied her twitching lips, she entered the house. On the way to her room she met her aunt. The elderly woman greeted her with an affectionate smile.

"Well, Constance, dear," she asked, "what are you going to do with yourself now?"

"Practice—after I have washed this dirt from my hands," the girl replied. "I've been fussing with the flowers out there in that veranda-box and my hands are very grimy."

"You've managed to get a little sunburned, too," Mrs. Hale observed, glancing at the flushed face. Then, as her niece made no answer, she patted the hot cheeks gently. "You are such a blessing to me these days," she said. "Edith is so changeable—poor child!—for she has been so upset. Her father, too, is absent-minded and worried—although he always makes an effort to be cheerful. But you are just the same all the time."

"Indeed I am not!" Constance protested. "Only just now Ralph and Edith accused me of being cross or quarrelsome, or something of the kind—and I was, too." She spoke the words lightly, yet there was a hint of feeling in the tone in which they were uttered. Her aunt, hearing this, spoke soothingly.

"Well," she said, "I don't care whether they said you were cross or not. I know you weren't! You are always the same dear girl."

“Not inside!” Constance warned her. “I just burn with rage sometimes. Perhaps”—laughing tremulously—“that is why I am rather thin. My inward rages burn up all my superfluous fat.”

Her aunt laughed, too. “I have never seen you show any bad temper in all your life,” she averred. “And I am sure you never would unless your sense of justice or your affections were outraged. If you loved any one to whom people were unjust, of course you would get angry. I would be disappointed in you if you did not.”

A swift wave of color, deeper than the flush that was already there, swept across the girl’s face. To hide this she bent and kissed her aunt.

“Then nobody must be unjust to you,” she remarked, half-seriously, “for I certainly do love you, auntie.”

“I know you do, dearie,” returned the elderly woman. “And now I mustn’t detain you, for I know you want to get to your music.”

Alone in her room, Constance’s cheeks were slow in cooling. Why, she demanded, had she felt embarrassed at her aunt’s speech when she

remembered that she had lost her temper in espousing Tom's cause? Ridiculous! She crushed the thought that any warmer sentiment than friendship had made her angry when his honor had been attacked. She told herself that Tom had always been kind and courteous to her, and that she felt toward him just what she would have felt toward any absent person whom she liked and who had been wrongfully accused. Yet she knew that not since her childhood had she been seized by such a rage as had possessed her twice to-day when Tom Morton had been wronged by word or hint.

She dashed cool water over her hot face, then resolutely determined not to let her thoughts stray any more to the topic that had agitated her. Of course the only sentiment she had for Tom was ordinary friendship!

With this assurance to herself, she went down to her practising. But thoughts do not always obey commands, and, although one's eyes may be upon one's notes, one's fancies may stray. As Constance Medford played this morning her mind reverted to what Ralph Morton had said. She remembered how angry she had been with

Edith only a few hours ago, and how later she could not trust herself to reply to the girl's overtures of peace. It was not like her, Constance, to lose self-control. She was sorry she had been so cross to Edith, even though it had been a cruel thing to return Tom's letter to him. Yet Constance loved her cousin and was willing to apologize to her for her hasty speech. She would not say that she had been unjust in reproving Edith for returning that letter—yet she could say truthfully that she regretted interfering in an affair that pertained to her cousin and not to herself. As to Ralph—as she mused on him, on his insinuations with regard to his friend, on his sneers, on his suggestions that Tom had been dishonorably detained from the engagement dinner—the anger which she fancied she had subdued returned in a measure, and her playing betrayed her indignation.

Mrs. Hale, knitting in the library across the hall, looked up from her work with a puzzled expression. It was wonderful what strength that child had in those slender little fingers of hers! With a half smile the kind-hearted matron arose and walked to the drawing-room door.

Here she stood quietly waiting until the music stopped.

"My dear!" she exclaimed then, "how do you ever play with such force? What has gotten into you to-day?"

Constance sprang to her feet. So absorbed had she been in her own reflections that even the gentle voice of her aunt had come as a shock to her.

"Oh!" she ejaculated nervously. "I did not know you were so near! Did I play with more vigor than usual?"

"You surely did," her aunt declared. "I never heard you play anything in that way before."

"But," Constance tried to explain, "you know that 'Ride of the Valkyries' is a noisy thing anyway, with the clashing of brasses and——"

She stopped, stammering at her own confusion.

"I think," her aunt suggested, "that you may have played it harder than usual just now because you were thinking harder than usual."

"Yes," Constance admitted, without looking up, "I was thinking much harder than usual!"

"You are right, my dear," Ralph declared sententiously, "Constance is cross this morning."

The betrothed pair had ridden some miles before the man made this assertion. Edith had allowed him his own will so far as conversation went, and he had talked about himself, his views of life and his experiences—casting over every incident a rose-colored light in which he appeared especially well. His companion was interested, in a way, in all that pertained to Ralph, but her mind was full of the beauty of the day, the joy of being loved by one man—perhaps more—and petted by her family and friends. She had gone little into the social world until she had made her bow to society last Autumn. Now, as her lover talked on, she mused of her little triumphs since then, and felt herself very fortunate. She was aware that the man who sat by her side was considered handsome and clever, and that many of the girls of her acquaintance would be much flattered by his attentions. So, if she did not love him much, there was in her heart a pride of possession

that seemed to her inexperience to be "the real thing."

Perhaps Ralph Morton felt a lack of enthusiasm in her desultory responses to his somewhat egotistical communications, for, after waiting in vain for her to express admiration of his conduct in some escapades of which he had just told her, he broke the ensuing silence with the remark quoted above. It had the effect of arousing his listener to animation.

"Oh," she protested. "I did not really mean that Constance was cross. I should not have said that. But to tell the truth she did get suddenly angry after breakfast when I told her I had returned Tom's letter to him unopened."

Ralph's face darkened. "She got angry, did she?" he queried.

"Oh, yes," Edith replied, her light laugh evincing how little rancor she felt toward her cousin. "It was awfully funny, although at first she actually scared me, for she spoke so sharply. But I know she didn't mean it. It was just a whim of the moment."

"Well, it lasted until my arrival or returned when I spoke out an honest thought," Ralph

said. "She flew into a white rage with me, too."

Edith looked at him in surprise. "Are you sure she was not in fun?" she asked.

"No, my dear; she was far from fun," he replied gravely.

"But what under the sun could you have said to make her angry with you?" Edith wondered.

"I had the temerity to touch upon the same subject that you touched upon," Ralph told her. "I suggested that Tom was not a Bayard without fear and without reproach, and she very plainly and distinctly informed me that my statement was 'a lie.' I quote her own words."

"Ralph!" Edith sat up very straight. "You don't mean she said that!"

"I do mean it, dearest. She said exactly that. You can hardly blame me for resenting her speech. It's what a man would call a fighting word, you know—to tell a person he lies!"

Astonishment held Edith speechless until they had reached the top of a hill commanding a glimpse of the Hudson.

"Yes, it's beautiful," she assented, absent-mindedly, as her companion called her attention

to the view below them. Then she asked abruptly: "Ralph, what do you suppose made Constance speak to you in that way? Do you know?"

The man seemed to hesitate before replying. He was guiding his car down the steep road on the other side of the hill they had just mounted, which may have accounted for his hesitation. When he spoke at last it was with apparent reluctance.

"I don't like to say that I know why she lost her temper with me," he said, "but I have my suspicions. And as there are to be no secrets between you and me, dearest, perhaps I ought to tell you what I suspect. You know that Constance and Tom have been good friends ever since she visited you some years ago—long before her father's death."

"Yes, I know," said Edith, "at least they got on pleasantly together when they met in my house. But that would hardly account for her resenting so hotly any criticism of him."

"No? Well, then, I must explain further. She is in Tom's confidence. He has told her about various affairs he has had. He may need money. She knows that, too. She has urged

you to accept Tom, has wanted you to marry him."

"But why?" asked Edith more puzzled than ever.

"Because he is her friend. She is poor and a dependent. As long as he has money he will see that she is provided for."

He paused, but the girl at his side still looked mystified. "Yet I don't understand," she said.

"I can't put it much more plainly," Ralph objected embarrassedly. "But surely you know that were Tom married to you his financial troubles would cease."

He stopped, startled by the girl's sudden exclamation. "Oh!" she gasped, "you don't mean that Tom ever thought of my money——"

She said no more, for the man had brought the car to a standstill on the lonely country road, and as she lifted her distressed face to his, he drew her to him and kissed her tenderly.

"Yes," he murmured, "my poor, trustful little girl, that is just what I mean. And when I think that any man could consider your money

in asking you to marry him—I feel as if I could kill him with my own hands!”

“And—and——” the girl faltered, “you believe that Connie considered my marriage to Tom from that viewpoint? I can’t think that!”

“Dear,” the man argued compassionately, “how could she help it when he showed it to her? He is the one to blame. Of herself perhaps she would never have thought of it. Now, darling—now do you understand why it is that I—loving you so that if you were a beggar I should still consider you my queen—feel as I do about Tom? Do you understand it now?”

But shocked surprise, disappointment and wounded pride made it impossible for Edith to do more than nod her assent. Yet as the man noted her agitation his eyes did not soften. Instead, a look of triumph stole into them as if he already anticipated a satisfactory crop from the seed which he had sown.

### *Chapter Thirteen*

The sound of an automobile coming up the driveway drew Constance to the window of her room where she had been sitting since leaving the piano a half hour ago. She had been trying to finish a dainty shirtwaist she was embroidering for Edith, but her fingers were not as steady as usual and she had set the regular stitches with difficulty. She was strangely agitated to-day, disturbed by a feeling as if something of an unusual nature were about to happen. She welcomed the sound of the approaching motor car as an excuse for abandoning her sewing and looking out of the window. She was not often so easily allured from any task.

"It's only Ralph and Edith," she murmured as the car came slowly around the turn in the driveway. "He looks self-satisfied, as usual. But Edith doesn't seem happy. I wonder what he's been saying to her."

She heard her aunt greet the pair at the front door when the automobile had come to a standstill. Mrs. Hale's voice urging Ralph to stay

to luncheon rang out clearly and the man's polite declination was borne to Constance's ears. If Edith spoke it was in such a low voice that her cousin did not hear her. Evidently she was in a quiet mood. The listener's conscience smote her as she thought that possibly her own impatient speech of several hours ago and her silence at Edith's advances toward peace had added to the girl's depression. She determined that she would do her part toward healing the breach—if breach there were. To this end she opened her door as she heard Edith coming upstairs.

"Come in here, dear, won't you?" she called cheerily.

Edith paused in the doorway, looking fixedly at the speaker.

"Why?" she asked. "Have you anything special to say to me?"

"Come in and I'll tell you," Constance urged. Then, as the girl obeyed, Constance closed the door behind them both, and turning to her companion put her arm about her.

"Dear," she said, "forgive me for being so sharp in my speech this morning. And forgive me also for not answering you when you

spoke jestingly to me as you were starting off on your drive. At that minute I could not reply, for I was nervous and foolishly upset, and was afraid to trust my voice lest I show some emotion. But I was not angry with you then, dear. As to what I said to you this morning about your having returned that letter—you must please pardon it. I spoke on the impulse of the moment, and about a matter that was none of my business. I am sure you love me enough to overlook it all, don't you, Edith?"

Edith had drawn herself from her cousin's embrace, but so gently that the movement did not seem like the outcome of anger.

"There's no need to apologize," she said, gravely. "From what Ralph tells me you were vexed with him for the same reason that you were vexed with me. He has also mentioned other things that hurt me so much more than your temper did that I can excuse that."

"What things?" demanded Constance, steadying her voice and concealing her wounded surprise at Edith's lack of response to her appeal.

"Oh, they all pertain to the same person, of course." Edith paused, then began to remove

the veil from her hat, lifting her hands and bending her head so that Constance could not see the expression of her face, and when she spoke again her voice was somewhat muffled by her attitude. "But you know without my telling you who that person is—Tom Morton, your friend and my enemy."

"Your enemy!" echoed Constance. "Scarcely that, Edith—although you and he have had a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding!" Edith exclaimed. "No, an understanding! For now I understand what he has been and is. Only this morning I have learned that you and he understand each other in a still different way! Oh, when I think of it all I see what a fool I have been all along!"

Constance noted the girl's growing excitement and strove to check it.

"Edith," she begged, "don't let yourself say things you may regret later, things that are, at the worst, but suspicions. Wait, dear, until you have had time to think, until you and I have had a quiet talk together."

But the agitated creature flung off the hand the other laid on her arm.

"A quiet talk!" she exclaimed. "Suspicious! No, there is no quiet talk that I care to have with you, Constance. As to what you call suspicions—they are facts, and you need not try to make me believe otherwise by hinting that Ralph is anything but good and honorable. You made me believe—or tried to make me believe—that Tom was good. But you cannot make me believe that Ralph is bad—now that I know you and Tom are in league together against him."

Constance's eyes flashed and her breath came quickly. "It is time that I demanded an explanation!" she declared. "What do you mean by that speech?"

"I will not tell you!" exclaimed Edith. "What would be the use? You know it all already. But it is my father whom I shall tell! *He* shall know the whole truth!"

She hesitated, then as her eyes met Constance's stern gaze she turned away abruptly, controlling her voice and manner by a mighty effort.

"If you will excuse me," she said, formally, "I will go to my room now and get ready for luncheon. And I must ask you as an especial

favor not to talk about this matter to my father until I have had time to do so myself."

"I do not promise to grant that favor," Constance returned firmly, "but I can assure you that my manner shall not betray to him or aunt that you and I are not on pleasant terms."

Edith started as if to speak, but, changing her mind, walked quickly away, and as she left the room Constance Medford made no movement to detain her.

It spoke well for the breeding of Edith Hale and Constance Medford that while they sat at luncheon with Mrs. Hale the elderly woman did not suspect that any altercation had occurred between the two girls. The meal ended, Edith remarked that she thought she would go into town to do a little shopping.

"There are several things I need," she observed, "and this is as good a time as any to get them, for I happen to have no engagement for this afternoon. I shall go to father's office and come out on the train with him."

She glanced at Constance as she said this. The older girl interpreted the look to mean that her cousin would now have an opportunity to tell her father of Ralph's insinuations. The

sudden qualm that assailed Constance was quickly replaced by a feeling of security in the wisdom of her uncle's judgment and in his trust in the orphan girl to whom he had been so kind. He, John Hale, would not believe anything against his wife's niece unless he heard something from Constance's own lips that would disappoint him in his present faith in her. Could Edith really believe Ralph's statements? Yet she knew that the man would tell such a plausible story that it would be hard for the most judicial listener to discredit it.

What could she do—she, a solitary girl—to protect herself against the calumny of a designing man? Would it do any good if she were to have a frank talk with him, were to ask him why he hated her? Yet even as she pondered she knew that the reason he hated her was because she saw through his subterfuges, because she was Tom Morton's friend and advocate, and because Edith and her money were at present the aim of Ralph's existence. He would do his best to ruin Tom Morton in the eyes of Edith's parents if by thus doing he could strengthen his own standing in the family and banish Tom from the circle of their acquaintances.

Once more in her own room with time to think collectedly, Constance Medford appreciated keenly the loneliness of her position. Yet what she did not appreciate was the feeling of distrust and wrathful resentment that had taken possession of Edith. It was the first time in John Hale's spoiled child's career that she had ever had occasion to suspect that a person courted her for any reason except to win the friendship or affection of her attractive self. The idea that the man who, she had flattered herself, loved her, that the cousin who had petted and indulged her, should have schemed to sacrifice her to their desire for her money—in fact, should have formed a vile conspiracy against her, had changed all the sweetness in her nature into the gall of bitterness. A vain woman cannot forgive such a blow to her vanity and self-love.

But this Constance did not know. Therefore when a light tap sounded on her door, she said "Come in!" with no premonition of the painful scene ahead of her. To her surprise, her cousin entered, dressed for her trip to town.

"Excuse me for intruding," Edith said coldly, "but I happened to notice when I was

in here this noon that you had been working on that blouse which you are embroidering for me. I just stopped in now to ask you not to trouble to finish it. I would rather not have it."

A hurt that was almost like a physical pain made Constance draw in her breath sharply. She replied at once, however, and in a natural tone.

"That must be as you wish," she said. "It has been a pleasure to me to do this little bit of sewing for you. You know I selected the shade of pink that you like best, and I have made the blouse especially for you. It has been a labor of love, Edith."

"Scarcely that, I think," said the younger girl. "I have no wish to discuss a painful matter with you, Constance. But you must understand that as I am engaged to a man whom you wish to injure I can hardly accept a so-called love-token from you. Yet, since you remind me that you selected this material and did the work for me, I do not want to put you to any loss. Therefore I am perfectly willing to buy the waist from you."

Constance flushed darkly and an angry glow sprang to her eyes. She closed the door, and,

putting her back against it, faced the sneering girl.

"See here," she said slowly, and in a tone that did not sound like her own, so hard and cold was it, "you do not wish to talk over a painful matter, but you do not hesitate to say things that I insist you shall explain. And you shall not leave this room until you tell me what you mean."

Edith threw her head back defiantly. "So that is your idea, is it?" she said. "I did not intend to say more, yet you drive me to it. You really wish to know what I mean?"

"I do!" Constance challenged in her turn.

Edith Hale let her last hold on her self-control go. Her whole frame seemed to radiate the rage that possessed her.

"Very well! Then you have yourself to blame, not me, if you hear the truth. I learned to-day that Tom Morton wanted to marry me for my money," she shuddered as she said the words, "and that as you and he are intimate you were to help him win me. Yes," as Constance grew deadly pale and shrank back in horror, "it sounds pretty bad to you, doesn't it? Think how it sounded to me who have

trusted you! And to accomplish your ends you have tried to poison my mind against the man who loves me for myself only. Can you deny that you warned me against Ralph?"

She paused, but as Constance did not answer immediately, hurried on. "Your silence gives consent," she accused. "Dare you deny that you have shown a distrust in Ralph, that you have tried to convince me of Tom's goodness and to bring about my marriage to him? Dare you deny that you and he have——"

She stopped, appalled for the instant at the look on her cousin's face. Before she could make another accusation Constance flung the door wide open and pointed to it, her eyes flashing, her lips twitching.

"Leave this room at once!" she ordered in a low, tense voice.

As if hypnotized, Edith started toward the hall, but in the doorway turned to send back a Parthian arrow.

"You will please remember," she sneered, "that this is one of my father's rooms you are ordering his daughter out of!"

But the white-faced girl, staring blankly at her, seemed too much dazed to reply.

Constance Medford was no saint. Sorrow and bereavement had taught her a certain amount of unselfishness and consideration for other people. These lessons she had acquired with more ease than would one of a less sunny temper. But at heart she was proud. Sincere herself, she could not stand any doubt of her sincerity. To her a lie was a mean sin. Having lived for years with her father she had learned to despise deception, for he had been an honorable gentleman. In him she had found her best-loved companion. The one girl who, she felt, knew her intimately, had been her cousin Edith. When Arthur Medford died his heart-broken daughter had thought at once of the only relatives whom she loved. They had thought of her as swiftly and had come to her, bearing her off to their home. She was sure that Edith had complete faith in her, that the girl had never grudged any of the favors shown by John Hale and his wife. While Constance recognized that Edith's nature was not deep, while she occasionally felt a passing annoyance with her facile likes and dislikes, she had always loved her and had been confident of Edith's affection for herself. The younger

girl had turned to her in perplexities of all kinds—a sure proof of one's trust in a friend.

All these things Constance remembered in the hours in which she was alone through the fair May afternoon. Her aunt came to her room and asked her if she would care to make some calls with her, but Constance pleaded a headache as an excuse for declining the invitation.

"It is kind of you to ask me, aunt," she said wistfully.

"I'm sorry you can't go, dear child," Mrs. Hale regretted. "But you do look pale and sick. Lie down now, dear, and let me darken your room."

It was easier to yield than to resist, Constance thought, and lay down obediently while her aunt closed the shutters and threw a light cover over her. When, after kissing her again, she had gone out, Constance lay still until she heard the Hale automobile drive away. Then she sat up in the darkened room, her hands clasping her throbbing head, and tried to think out the situation. And the "thoughts of youth" that are "long, long thoughts" drove her nearly wild.

Certain facts stood out clearly before her.

One was that Ralph Morton hated her and was trying to injure her, but this in itself troubled her little. That he had succeeded in making Edith, her pet and best girl friend, believe his scurrilous lies, ate into her very soul. That John Hale might question her terrified her. Not that she was afraid for herself, but she simply could not tell him of the cruel things his daughter, his only and darling child, had said to a lonely girl, a beneficiary of his bounty. That was what hurt—the hopelessness of ever clearing up the situation. Here was she, Constance Medford, making her home in the house of a man whose daughter believed her to be a vile schemer, who even taunted her with the fact that she was a dependent.

As she pondered the situation she reached the only decision possible. She could not continue to live here, since she could not let her uncle know what Ralph had said. For if she did, he would renounce Ralph and thus Edith would be made wretched. But where should she go? She could support herself in a way by teaching music, but as her pupils were all in Homewood what would she do if she left this place? It would make disagreeable comment

were she to board in this town now after having made her home with her relatives. The only thing for her to do would be to board in New York and commute daily to Homewood. She would explain this to her uncle.

The sinking sun was casting level rays into her room when at last she appreciated that the afternoon had passed, and that the family would soon return home. She would make herself presentable, for life must be lived no matter how one's plans and hopes have been upset.

She was dressed for dinner when her uncle sent word to her that he would like to see her in the library. She had heard him and Edith arrive some minutes earlier, and had been dreading this summons.

She, like Ralph when he had so recently been ushered into this room, was glad to find John Hale alone. Edith had gone upstairs.

"Come in, Constance, and sit down," her uncle said kindly. Yet there was a constraint about his manner that the girl felt. "I want to ask you a question or two."

The questions were delicately put. John Hale had learned from Edith that Constance and she had had some bitter words as a result of an

accusation that the younger girl had made against the older one.

"I asked Edith to tell me what she accused you of, but all I could learn was that one of the items was a partiality for Tom rather than for Ralph," John Hale said. "I could hardly blame you for that," he tried to smile, "since, as you know, I favored Tom's suit myself. Yet," becoming grave again, "Edith tells me that she urged you to deny certain things which she was forced to believe, and that you could not do this."

He paused, as if hoping his listener would make some comment, but she said nothing.

"Edith," he continued, "was undoubtedly deterred from telling me just what passed between you and her for fear she might seem disloyal to you if she said too much—I mean she probably refused to go into particulars as to what she had heard, preferring to stand by you in this matter."

The face at which he was gazing underwent a swift change. Something that was almost like a bitter smile twisted the pale lips. The expression of cynicism irritated the man, and he spoke out impulsively.

“Putting all that aside”—he said harshly, “what surprises me most, Constance, is that my daughter declares that you ordered her out of your room, that you were so swept away by wrath that you could do this to Edith—the girl who has always loved you! I cannot imagine that anything that child could say could make you as angry as that. I hope you regret the action now?”

But though he waited for a reply, Constance still sat before him, silent.

“Surely,” he urged, his voice softening, “you are sorry for what you did?” And again he paused, waiting for the answer that did not come.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Some of the moments that are like hours followed John Hale's appeal to Constance Medford. To the man they were long; to the girl they seemed an eternity. She was silent, not from obstinacy, but from actual inability to express herself. The fact that in justice to others she could not speak the truth held her dumb. She had grown very pale, and a great pity for her moved her companion. He longed to draw the lonely girl to him and tell her that he wanted to help her. Of course she had lost all self-control for a moment, yet she was sorry for it now.

But his kindly impulses received a shock when, as he repeated, "I am sure you are sorry now," the girl said resolutely:

"I am sorry to displease you, uncle. But I cannot truthfully say that I regret my action."

John Hale started to his feet in astonishment. "Constance!" he ejaculated, "you will please give me a satisfactory explanation of that speech!"

"No, uncle," Constance said, rising, too. "I am afraid my explanation would not be satisfactory to you, yet it is the only one I can give."

"I insist upon hearing it, whatever it is!" he demanded.

The girl dropped her eyes. "I will tell you all that I feel that I can," she said. As she stood before her questioner, her hands tightly clasped, the fingers interlocked, she looked like a frightened yet unrepentant child. "Others can tell you more if they wish. All I can say is that Edith thinks I have been anxious to have her marry Tom instead of Ralph, and that I like Tom and do not like Ralph."

Her uncle regarded her incredulously. "And for that accusation from Edith—a silly accusation, perhaps, but surely not an offensive one—you ordered a loving girl from your room in such a manner that she broke down and cried in telling me of it in my office this afternoon. Yes she did! In all her life I have never known Edith to show as much hurt and resentment as she displayed in talking of this trouble. Yet when I questioned her as to details she referred me to you."

Constance raised her head and looked him squarely in the eyes. "And I," she said, "in my turn refer you to her."

Before she could guess the man's intention, he strode to the door, and, opening it, called Edith. His daughter answered so promptly that Constance wondered if she had been waiting at the head of the stairs. She came down immediately, and, as her father closed the door behind her, glanced at him inquiringly. She did not look in Constance's direction.

"What is it, father?" she asked. Her voice was hard and her eyes cold.

"Sit down, darling," her father said. Then, as an after-thought, he suggested. "Sit down, Constance." Wearily he took his own chair at his desk.

"Daughter," he said, "you have never lied to me nor disobeyed me in all your life. I want you to tell me now what took place in Constance's room this afternoon."

The reply was an abrupt question. "Hasn't Constance told you?"

"She says," the parent informed her, "that you accused her of a partiality for Tom and of

a desire to have you marry Tom rather than Ralph. Is that what you said to her?"

"It is a part of what I said to her," Edith replied. "But I told her the whole truth, or as much as I had courage to tell. I want to obey you, father, but all I can bring myself to tell you is that I did accuse Constance of being Tom's—ally, of wanting him to marry me—for reasons which I stated,—of—— Oh, dad, I can't go on with the disgraceful story! I dared her to deny it—for I thought she might be able to explain a part of the clandestine business—and she ordered me from her room!"

"Great Heavens!" the man looked appalled. "Edith," he insisted, forcing himself to speak calmly—"where did you learn all this story?"

"From someone who knows the truth and spoke it," she replied.

"From Ralph, I suppose," Mr. Hale rejoined. "Then he shall give me facts."

"Father," Edith pleaded, "as Ralph is a gentleman and Tom's cousin, it would hardly be fair to question him. But I, as his fiancée, have a right to say what *I* know. I asked Constance to write and tell Tom that I did not want to see him. She said she would. I thought no more

about it. Now I learn that on that very day she got a telegram from him, and that the letter she pretended to write at my request was really an answer to that telegram. I suppose she told him she regretted my treatment of him, and that she was still his friend." She paused, breathless with indignation.

"How do you know she got a telegram from Tom?" Mr. Hale demanded.

"Because," the girl hesitated—"well—Peter—Ralph's man, you know—passing at that time, saw a messenger boy hand the yellow envelope to Constance, and mentioned this to Ralph. She stood in the shelter of the trees and read it. Later, as Ralph went to the office for a copy of the wire that had been delivered to his mother by phone the night before, he asked casually if any message had come to this place from Tom Morton. You see, Ralph knows the operator well, and he learned that a message had come addressed to Miss Medford. Of course Ralph was too honorable to ask what the telegram said."

Mr. Hale laughed harshly. "The same consideration might have kept him from prying into the matter at all, or tempting an employee

of the telegraph company to talk of that about which he is supposed to hold his tongue. Perhaps he thinks all is fair in love and war, and this seems to be both. But that is beside the question. I will try to get at the truth about the first charge you bring. My dear," turning to his niece, "was the telegram you received from Tom of a private nature?"

"Yes, sir," the girl replied, without looking at the questioner.

"Did it pertain to Edith's affairs?"

"Yes, sir."

A pained look came to the man's face. "Did you," he asked sternly, "reply to that telegram?"

"Yes, sir," Constance answered in a dull tone.

"Was the nature of that reply confidential?"

"Yes, it was!" the harassed girl exclaimed, springing to her feet. "Oh, I cannot tell you anything more," she declared abruptly, "except that I am sorry for your disappointment in me—after all you have done for me." Her voice broke. "Excuse me!" she murmured incoherently, and fled from the room and upstairs.

As she reached the turn on the staircase

Ralph entered the front door. He paused as he spied the slight, hurrying figure; then walked straight into the library.

He appeared flushed from exercise and more than usually handsome and sure of himself. He had been invited to dine here to-night and had expected to find Edith awaiting him.

"Hallo!" he said. "Am I early or late for your dinner hour?"

He stopped, as if just now conscious that something unusual had been going on. The pair whom he greeted did not know that he had seen Constance's flight and had suspected that an agitating scene had just been enacted. "I beg pardon if I am interrupting or intruding," he added.

"Not at all!" John Hale rejoined gravely. "Perhaps you can clear up this mystery. Did you furnish Edith with alleged facts about her cousin—and about Tom Morton?"

Once more Ralph found himself in a position where the truth was safer than a lie. He looked unflinchingly at the speaker.

"I did tell Edith," he acknowledged, "certain facts which, as my betrothed and future wife, she should know. It is my right to pro-

tect her. It was my duty to put her on her guard."

"Against whom?" demanded Edith's father.

"Against Tom Morton and his—friend," he replied, dropping his voice as if regretting to be forced to make this admission. "I was aware of certain clandestine transactions——"

"Stop!" warned John Hale. "You will have to prove what you say! I challenge you to prove anything against my niece!"

Here Edith broke in. "I have told father," she explained, "that Constance has received at least one telegram from Tom—a telegram which she kept secret and that she wrote to him clandestinely."

"Wait, dear," her father reproved her, "you said you asked her to write."

It was evident that he was clinging tenaciously to his hope in the orphaned girl's honor, also that his faith in her had had a rude shock.

"Yes, daddy," Edith replied gently. "But you heard her acknowledge that the letter she wrote was of a private nature, and in reply to Tom's telegram. Oh, it is all dreadful enough as it is—but, father, do not add to my wretchedness by doubting Ralph! He has kept silent

all these months, while he has known what was going on—never speaking until I gave him the right to. You must believe him as I do—implicitly!”

“I believe implicitly, my dear,” the older man said dryly, “the person whose statements will bear investigation. I cannot question Constance further. She is pitifully nervous. She refuses to explain her strange conduct to you this afternoon.”

Ralph looked inquiringly at his betrothed. “Yes, Ralph,” she said in reply to his look, her eyes filling with tears of self-pity. “Constance ordered me from her room—actually that—flung open the door and commanded me to go out, slamming it after me and locking it!”

As sobs checked further speech on her part, John Hale’s indignation against his niece reasserted itself and Ralph, noting this, ceased his own murmurs of sympathy for the weeping girl to turn upon her father with:

“Can you hear that and still believe in Constance’s loyalty to her cousin? Oh, sir, I am sorry, heart-broken, to have been the cause of all this suffering. I had hoped by warning

Edith quietly of the state of affairs to prevent all this. Not that I blame Edith for asking Constance for an explanation——”

“I could not help it!” sobbed the girl. “I loved her and could not bear to think she had been disloyal when I trusted her.”

“Be still, my child,” John Hale bade her. There was no severity in his manner, yet it had the effect of quieting the hysterical girl. “We all—myself most of all—are making a great ado about a matter we know nothing about. My common sense has come suddenly to the front. I shall form no opinion until I know more than I know now.”

“Yet, surely,” Ralph reminded him, “you can hardly excuse your niece’s behavior this afternoon to this poor girl!”

“I surely do not understand it,” the father replied. “But I shall suspend judgment until I have one more talk with the other person concerned.”

“You mean——” Ralph began.

“I mean,” Mr. Hale interrupted him, “Tom Morton. When I had a talk with him early this afternoon”—Ralph started, then controlled further evidence of astonishment—“I was igno-

rant of certain things which I now suspect. I shall therefore see him again."

"When? Where?" queried Ralph. His tone was natural, yet a keen observer would have noted signs of uneasiness in his manner.

"To-night, and here if possible," Mr. Hale replied. "All right!" to the maid who announced dinner. "We will be right in." As the servant withdrew he turned again to the young people. "I would suggest," he said, "that we do not annoy mother with any of this trouble unless we have to. We will appear as if nothing had happened. I do not want to arouse her suspicions by telephoning to Tom now, for she would hear me from the dining-room. As soon as she goes into the library after dinner I will call him up. Ah, there comes Constance downstairs now. She can be counted on to comport herself as if all was well. The girl certainly understands how to keep her troubles to herself. Come into dinner now, both of you, and let us all try for the next hour to forget the unfortunate occurrences of the day."

The presence of one person ignorant of certain embarrassing conditions will help those

who are conscious of these to act as if they, too, were ignorant of them. So at table this evening the men talked of affairs in the business world—at least Mr. Hale talked business and Ralph answered in a way that would lead one to suppose him well informed along these lines; Edith made an occasional remark, while Constance replied pleasantly to any question put to her. Her silence at other times was accounted for in her aunt's mind by the fact that "the child had a headache."

Mrs. Hale seemed inclined to linger longer than usual over the coffee. She had made calls in the afternoon and told happily of what she had heard and seen upon her expedition.

"I was so sorry you were not well enough to accompany me," she said to her niece.

Constance smiled wanly in appreciation of this remark.

"But you are still pale," her aunt observed.

John Hale saw in this speech an opportunity to suggest leaving the table. He wanted to telephone to Tom, but did not wish to betray this fact to his wife.

"Perhaps Constance's head would be better in a cooler room than this," he ventured.

His wife agreed with him at once. "Why, of course!" she exclaimed. "I have been sitting here talking of myself while I might better have been thinking of other people's comfort."

As the betrothed pair and Mrs. Hale moved on into the library, Constance opened the front door and lingered there a moment. The air felt good upon her heated forehead. As she stood thus, she was aware that her uncle was telephoning to some one.

"I insist that you come!" he was saying peremptorily. "Yes. I know it's past eight now. But take your car and come out. I shall expect you, Tom! I don't care if you don't arrive until ten—I shall be waiting for you."

So Tom was coming here to-night, Constance thought with a dull surprise.

A stealthy step made her turn. Ralph was just reëntering the library. He had come out into the hall unnoticed by her, she appreciated swiftly. Then he, too, had heard her uncle's summons to Tom.

"Constance!" Mrs. Hale called. "Where are you, dear?"

"Here I am," the girl replied, going into the library.

"I just wanted to ask how your head is now," her aunt said. "These young people are going out on the veranda, but your uncle and I will be glad to have you sit here with us."

"Thank you," Constance said. "But if you will excuse me, I will go to my room soon. Perhaps my head will be improved by rest and darkness."

"Headaches are nasty things," Ralph declared patronizingly, with an effort to speak as if he and Constance were on pleasant terms. But as the girl made no reply, and Edith did not second his remark, he changed the subject and told an amusing story at which his fiancée smiled and her mother laughed good-naturedly.

Yet Constance saw that there was a restless expression in his eyes and that he replied absent-mindedly to some question his hostess asked him, as if his thoughts were elsewhere.

When, a moment later, John Hale entered, the young man turned to him with exaggerated nonchalance.

"Might I," he asked, "use your telephone for a moment? I happen to remember a matter I should have spoken to my man about before I left home."

“Certainly,” Mr. Hale returned gravely. “You know where the instrument is.”

“Was he really going to call up his home?” Constance wondered skeptically. Yet her doubt as to his intention was dispelled as, having told her relatives good-night, she passed through the hall on her way to her room and heard Ralph ask some one at his house to tell Peter to come to the telephone. She seemed destined to overhear telephone communications, she mused as she hurried on upstairs and closed her door before anything more could reach her ears. Then the matter passed from her mind—crowded out by her unhappiness.

While Mr. and Mrs. John Hale were seated in the library, reading, as was their custom at this hour, and Ralph and Edith had sauntered out upon the veranda, the lonely girl sat in the dark trying to quiet her nervous fears and look her own situation squarely in the face. But much thinking brought no solution of her problem or checked the dread of the future that possessed her. At last, with a feeling of breathlessness, she threw open the window and, dropping on her knees by it, drew in long breaths of the fragrant night air. The sky was thick

with stars, for the moon had not yet risen. It would be nearly eleven before it would be up.

Kneeling there Constance remembered Emerson's familiar lines—lines she had often heard her father repeat.

“ ‘Teach me your mood, O patient stars!’ ”

she whispered, then stopped. Patient! Yes, they could afford to be patient, she reflected. Their courses were planned for them; their places were assigned them by the laws of the universe. But she was only a poor atom, she told herself. When the young are wretched, they are very wretched. It takes a long while to learn that the effect of pain on the character is a greater thing than the pain itself—and that what that effect shall be rests with God and the sufferer himself.

Whom could she trust? this girl demanded of her soul. Of course there were her uncle and her aunt, but they would be governed by their daughter's judgment, so she could no longer count on them. She had no human counselor!

Then all at once she remembered Tom. He

was her friend. Yet she had no right to turn to him at this juncture. What was she to him or he to her? Even as she asked herself this question she was conscious of a sense of comfort. She did not pause to analyze it. A normal girl is not, as a rule, given to analysis. All this one knew now was that she could never doubt Tom Morton, that he stood for more in her little world than did anyone else.

Folding her arms on the window sill, she dropped her head upon them, and knelt motionless. The stars shone on calmly; the soft wind murmured drowsily in the trees. A clock somewhere in the village struck nine.

Suddenly Constance Medford was startled by a gentle stir on the walk beneath her window. Her room was at the side of the house where a narrow path ran between two rows of shrubbery. With a swift sense of fright she peered out into the darkness.

A man was standing down there in the shadows, waiting.

For whom?

## *Chapter Fifteen*

The question repeated itself to the motionless girl crouching by the open window. For whom was that man down there waiting? At first her brain seemed too much dazed to grasp more than that one thought—"for whom?" If he had come to see any one whom he had a right to ask to see he would not stand there in the shelter of the shrubbery, but would go boldly to the front door.

Then, with a sigh of relief, Constance remembered the servants. This man might be a friend of one of the maids. Yet, if so, why had he not gone at once to the rear door? Mrs. Hale never objected to her maids having decent men call on them. There was a pleasant sitting room in which the girls were allowed to receive their friends. Unless this man were plotting mischief he would not skulk about the house in this way. None of the maids was the kind of girl who would make clandestine appointments.

This might be a burglar! The idea brought Constance to her feet and sent her hurrying

across the room to her door. She would have a word alone with her uncle. She had reached the head of the stairs when she heard her cousin's voice at the front door. She was evidently coming in—perhaps upstairs.

"I'll be right back, Ralph," Edith was saying. "I just want to get a shawl from my room. It's getting a little chilly."

As the light footfall sounded on the stairs Constance stepped back into her own room, closing the door gently behind her. She did not wish to come face to face with Edith just then.

Those matter-of-fact, familiar voices had had the effect of making her frightened impulse of a moment ago appear foolish now. She would first make certain that the man she had thought she saw was really there on the path. Perhaps her nervousness had excited her imagination.

Once more she leaned from the window, and, as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the garden, she saw that the figure was still there on the path. She had hardly discerned this when she was startled by the sound of a cautious step approaching from the corner of the house. She caught her breath with surprise as Ralph's voice sounded, very low.

“Peter!” he murmured. “Is that you?”

“Yes, sir,” came from the waiting figure, as it moved forward to meet the newcomer.

“I have only a moment, so pay attention to what I have to say,” Ralph ordered. “I have an important errand to attend to as soon as possible. Hurry back home, get my car and bring it down to the corner of Homewood Avenue and Cliff Avenue—one block down—you know that dark corner below there. Understand? And hold your tongue about it!”

“Sure!” the man rejoined. “Will you want me to drive you?”

“No. As soon as I meet you you can go back home. I will not need you again to-night. Now hurry!”

The two figures parted—one gliding out of the side gate to the garden, the other strolling back to the front veranda. When she heard Edith descending to the lower hall Constance went to the head of the stairs and listened. That her action might be construed into eaves-dropping—which she detested—never occurred to her. She must know what Ralph was going to do, where he was going—for a great fear had gripped her heart.

She heard him greet Edith cheerfully as she went out of the front door. "Suppose we walk around the garden," he proposed, "before I go home?"

"Are you going so soon?" Edith asked in surprise, and the man replied that when he had telephoned to his house a while ago he had learned that his mother was not feeling very well and would like to have him come home early. Peter told him this when he talked with him and he really felt that, under the circumstances——

Constance had heard enough. She returned to her room and closed her door. Then she stood still for a long minute.

There are times in the life of many a person when, for a brief period, one seems almost clairvoyant, almost able to read the mind of another. This minute, while she stood there, was one of those periods in the life of Constance Medford. She knew—although she did not understand how she knew—that Ralph was going out alone to meet Tom Morton. He had heard, as she had heard, Mr. Hale telephone to Tom, had heard him insist that he must come to-night even if he could not get here before ten o'clock.

Tom's presence at this juncture would mean the overthrow of Ralph's plans, might mean the destruction of that for which he had worked and schemed. If the father told the discarded lover of the charges brought against Constance by Ralph Morton, Tom would tell the truth about Ralph—driven to this extreme by righteous wrath. The thought of Tom's friendship for her had thrilled Constance only a little while ago. Now it terrified her, for she appreciated that if the accusations brought against her by Ralph were repeated to Tom, Ralph would have to bear the penalty of his foul lies. And she also knew that Ralph knew this, feared it and would prevent it. But how?

The answer seemed to whisper itself suddenly through the silent room:

*“Certainly not by fair means—then surely by foul!”*

The frightened girl started as if stung by a lash.

“Tom! Tom!” she gasped. “I must stop him! I must warn you!”

She touched the button of the electric light, and, as the radiance flashed forth, ran to her closet, took from a hook a long, dark cloak

and threw it around her. Snatching a black veil from her bureau drawer she wound this about her head. These actions took but a moment, yet as she glanced at the clock and saw it was a quarter past nine, she shuddered. Then, switching off the light, she stole noiselessly down the back stairs, out of the side door, and a moment later was running down the street toward the distant road leading from the Fort Lee ferry to Homewood.

“I must go now, dearest,” Ralph said.

He glanced at his watch in the light gleaming from the open front door. Peter would be awaiting him by the time that he could walk to the place of meeting. He must not linger here a minute longer.

“I wish you did not have to go so soon,” Edith regretted.

“I wish so, too,” he responded. “But, dear, you know that when mother is not so well I feel I ought to set aside my own preferences.”

“And mine, too?” the girl suggested with a little pout.

Of course he assured her that were he to follow the dictates of his heart he would stay

right here. She said, "Oh, that is all right!" and allowed him to kiss her good-night. Yet as the man walked toward the gate he hoped that Edith was not going to prove to be an exacting fiancée, while the girl, going into the house, found herself somewhat piqued that Ralph could leave her so easily even at his mother's bidding. She felt that if he loved her as he should love her he should know no superior claim on his affections and time.

John Hale looked up in surprise as his daughter entered the library.

"Where's Ralph?" he asked.

"Gone home," she informed him. Then as she saw her father's face darken, she hastened to explain her lover's departure. It was one thing for her to resent it and quite another for her parent to do so. "His mother is not well," she said. "When he called up his house a while ago Peter told him his mother was asking for him. Of course, dad, it was his duty to go to her."

John Hale started to speak, then glanced at his wife and checked himself. But the girl knew he was not satisfied with her explanation. Before she could say anything more there was

a sound of someone coming up on the veranda and she turned back to see who it was.

"May I come in?" asked a cheery voice, and Edward Dayton came into the hall.

"Indeed you may!" exclaimed Edith, smiling brightly. She remembered in a flash how this man had championed her on the evening of the never-to-be-forgotten engagement dinner, and her heart warmed to him.

"It is an unconscionably late hour to call, I know," Edward Dayton said as Mr. and Mrs. Hale welcomed him. "But I saw your hospitable light shining from all the lower windows as I passed along the street down there, so I was sure you were all downstairs yet—and this knowledge tempted me just to run in and see you for a few minutes."

"I am glad you came," Edith told him frankly. "It is too early to go to bed, and I was just wishing I had a pleasant person to talk to."

Dayton looked at her with a mischievous smile. "I might not have had the temerity to come in," he teased, "if I had not seen Ralph Morton hurrying down toward Cliff Avenue a few moments ago. I knew that as he was not

here I would not be poaching upon his preserves."

Edith laughed, then, struck by an uncomfortable idea, asked quickly, "Where did you say you met him?"

"Down near Cliff Avenue—probably on his way to the village for something he had forgotten, for he was walking so rapidly that he did not even see me."

"Yes," Edith agreed, "he had probably forgotten something in the village." She glanced at her father and the expression in his eyes did not quiet her feeling of apprehension. "Suppose we go out on the veranda for a while," she suggested to Dayton. "You don't mind, do you, mother?"

"Certainly not, my dear," her mother replied. "I'm going to sit here with father and finish my book before I go upstairs."

Seated on the veranda with a companion who was an attentive listener and a good talker, Edith forgot, for a while, her perplexity with regard to Ralph's destination. Not so her father. When, after twenty minutes' chat, Edward Dayton bade Edith and her parents good-night and went home, John Hale detained his

daughter in the hall for a moment. He spoke reluctantly.

"I had hoped that Ralph would stay to see Tom," he said. "As he did not, I telephoned to his house just now to tell him to come here as soon as he could leave his mother. He was not at home nor has he been at home since before dinner, his mother's maid said. She also said that her mistress is as well as usual this evening, and that she was not aware that any message had been sent from Mrs. Morton to 'Mr. Ralph.' I warned her not to tell Mrs. Morton of my having telephoned, as it might make her anxious about Ralph."

"But, dad," the girl protested, "I know he meant to go right home and that his mother did send for him, for——"

"Yet," her father interrupted her, "Ned Dayton saw him five minutes after he left here going toward Cliff Avenue. I don't understand it—and I confess I don't like it!"

"What do you mean?" the girl demanded indignantly. "Surely you don't mean to intimate that he told me a deliberate lie—that he——"

She checked herself as her mother came out from the library.

"I've finished my book and I'm going to bed," announced the matron. "But first I'll stop in Connie's room and see how her head is. I hope she's asleep. Come to my room and tell me good-night on your way to bed, daughter dear."

Moved by a presentiment of impending trouble, father and daughter stood silent at the foot of the stairs while the elderly woman went up. They heard her enter Constance's room, softly, heard her low-voiced query, heard her hurry across the room and open the door of her niece's dressing-room, then run across the floor to the head of the stairs.

"John! Edith!" she called excitedly, "where can Constance be? Her room is empty, so is her dressing-room—and her bed has not been slept in. Oh—my dears—where can she be? Where *can* she be?"

"Hush!" John Hale exclaimed, running upstairs to his trembling wife. "The servants will hear you!"

"But, John," panted the agitated woman, clinging to his arm, "I tell you the child's gone!

Oh, Edith," as her daughter reached her side, "I tell you Connie's gone!"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated the girl. "Suppose she has gone out? What is there to frighten you in that?"

She spoke as if she, too, were not startled, but secretly she was disturbed and puzzled. Her father had grown suddenly pale, yet his reassuring words gave no hint of his trepidation.

"Martha," he urged, "it is possible that Constance may have gone out for a stroll in the garden in the hope that the fresh air would ease the pain in her head."

"But it is not like her to do that," his wife insisted. "And I am so frightened lest her head may have been so bad that it affected her mind, and that she may have wandered off——"

"Ridiculous!" her husband declared. His stern, yet calm manner produced the effect he desired upon his wife. "It would be foolish," he continued, "to let the servants know you are worried. They would fancy all sorts of things, even"—with a sorry attempt at a laugh—"an elopement."

Mrs. Hale tried to laugh, too, but only succeeded in perpetrating a sound between a sob

and a giggle. "Well, I couldn't help being scared, John," she said, "and I can't deny that I am still anxious."

"Edith," commanded Mr. Hale, as he led his wife into her own room, "you stay with mother while I go into the garden and see if Constance is there?"

Five minutes later he returned, his face paler than before. "No," he reported, "I did not find her. Now, Martha, keep calm and listen to reason. Wherever Constance is she went there of her own accord. She is no baby or little girl, but a grown woman—twenty-three years of age.

"I shall, of course, try to ascertain where she is, for she is your niece and an inmate of my house. But I am not frightened about her physical welfare, although I am angry with her for doing such an improper and injudicious thing as leaving the house alone at this hour of the night."

"She probably did it to punish us," Edith suggested in a low voice.

"What's that?" Mrs. Hale demanded. "To punish you? What for?"

"There is not time to talk about it now, my dear," said her husband. "All I can explain

to you at present is that I reproved Constance this afternoon for something she did, and she was angry about the matter."

"Angry! Constance!" exclaimed Constance's aunt incredulously. "Well, if so, it was because she was not well and not like herself."

"Perhaps," assented Mr. Hale skeptically. The aspersions cast upon Constance by Ralph Morton seemed terribly near the truth when viewed in the light of to-night's occurrences.

"Why not telephone to Ralph to help you search for her?" suggested Mrs. Hale.

"Ralph isn't at home, I think," Mr. Hale began, then stopped and looked at Edith. The same thought had occurred to father and daughter. Ralph had gone on some mysterious errand, one which he had tried to conceal from them. Constance had gone somewhere secretly. Was there any connection between these two circumstances?

"Now, mother," the husband said, soothingly, "you try to keep quiet—you and Edith—and don't talk about this matter until I get back."

"But where are you going?" asked the wife tremulously.

"To the garage first, to tell Robert to get out

the automobile. I shall have him drive me to the station and to the—well, to several places. Constance may have decided to go to New York, you know. I won't be gone long."

Edith followed him into the hall. "Dad!" she pleaded in a low voice, "mayn't I go, too, please!"

"No!" he replied with decision. "Your place is here with your mother."

"But, father"—her manner becoming less cajoling, "surely I have a right to know what you suspect—what you fear. Remember, please, father, that since you are thinking things about Ralph, I have a right to know at least something of what is in your mind."

"I don't know what I suspect or fear, as you phrase it," he retorted brusquely. Yet as he reached the head of the stairs, he turned again to his daughter. "I confess, my dear," he said with bitter emphasis, "that I cannot help remembering some of the insinuations you and Ralph made this afternoon—I wish to God I had never heard them!"

Before the surprised girl could gather courage to ask another question, he was gone. A minute later, standing at the window in the back

hall, Edith heard him summon Robert, the chauffeur, from his room over the garage.

When she had returned to her mother and was trying to talk with her of any matter except the one that occupied the minds of both women, the crunching of gravel on the driveway and the purring of an automobile engine notified the listeners that the master of the house and his man had gone in search of their missing relative.

"Why not go to bed now, mother?" Edith suggested gently after a while.

But the matron insisted that she was too nervous to lie down.

"I will, however, put on a wrapper and rest here on the lounge until father comes back," she said. "And you can sit here and talk to me."

Conversation languished, as it always does when it is forced and not spontaneous. The daughter saw that her mother was paying scant attention to the desultory remarks made to her, and that every nerve was strained for any sound that might indicate the return of the missing girl or of John Hale himself. The clock on the mantel ticked away more loudly than ever, yet the hands moved with madden-

ing slowness. Edith felt that if her mother would only talk she could stand the suspense better.

Yet when at last, by asking questions about people and events connected with the elderly woman's girlhood, she led her on to talk of old times, the impatient girl felt as if the monologue would never end and that if there was anything worse than the periods of silence which she had tried to end it was this long story which her mother was telling. If something did not happen soon, Edith Hale told herself, she would go mad!

## *Chapter Sixteen*

Although John Hale was a kind and considerate employer he was not in the habit of conversing freely with his employees. So Robert was not surprised when he said little about his errand as they drove out of the gates of the Hale estate.

"The railroad station first," Mr. Hale ordered.

He did not linger long in the station. Walking through the waiting-room, he glanced at the few persons seated there, learned that the train to New York was due now, waited until it had rolled into the station and steamed out, then returned to his car.

"I think," he told the chauffeur, "that it would be well for you to drive down to the ferry."

"The ferry, sir!" exclaimed Robert, astonished.

"That's what I said," replied the master, tersely. Then, more kindly: "There's a friend who may be going to New York by the Fort

Lee ferry and whom I wish to speak to. I want to look at the trolleys from Homewood as they discharge their passengers."

"Yes, sir," returned the man, respectfully.

Yet the automobile had not gone a half mile before a new idea seized the owner. If Constance wanted to elude them all, she would hardly have taken a trolley car through a town where she would be recognized. The foolish girl would have chosen some other method of getting away. Yet she would not have hired a conveyance—if she wished to avoid awakening the curiosity of the suburbanites. Would she attempt to walk all that distance to the ferry? Never! Why should he fancy that she was going to New York? Perhaps she had only meant to meet Ralph somewhere—had planned to talk her rage out to him.

Yet that did not seem likely unless her indignation against her cousin's betrothed had moved her to make an appointment with him—or to offer some inducement to him to withdraw his charges against her. Had she sent any message to Ralph this evening, and was this what had made him alter his plans? If so, was not this a virtual admission that his accusations

against her were at least partially true? Edward Dayton had seen him walking toward the village. Had Ralph then agreed to meet Constance on some sheltered street on the outskirts of the town? It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

"Wait!" John Hale exclaimed suddenly. "Drive slowly down Homewood Avenue. Perhaps my friend decided to walk a part of the way to the ferry."

"Yes, sir," said the man, retarding his speed. "I'll drive slowly, sir."

"And I will watch," John Hale remarked, then lapsed again into silence.

Ralph Morton reached the corner of Homewood and Cliff Avenues several moments before Peter drove up, a circumstance that tempted the master to blend profanity with the remarks with which he greeted his servant.

"Get out!" Ralph ordered, adding, as the man sprang out of the car, and he himself took his seat in it, "Where in —— have you been all this time?"

"The right front tire went flat," Peter re-

plied sulkily, "and I had to pump her up. I guess there's a leaky valve there."

An exclamation more forcible than elegant was called forth by this bit of information. It was followed by the statement that, leak or no leak, the tire would have to last out the present expedition.

"If not, I'll ride on the rim sooner than stop to-night," the master declared angrily. "It does seem that since you're paid to do your work you might once in a while take the time to keep this machine in good order. If the tire leaks, it's your fault. Shut up!" as the man started to protest. "Your excuses don't go down here! Do your work better or leave!"

It may be observed in passing that Ralph Morton knew he was quite safe in speaking thus to his man. Peter had a sickly wife and four young children dependent upon him. Moreover, he was not a skilled mechanician, nor an expert gardener. Had he been a younger and more competent man, with no family to provide for, Ralph would have found it quite possible to curb his tongue and suppress his angry outburst—unless he was willing to look for another servant. Besides all this, Ralph's mother—not

Ralph—paid this man's wages. But that, of course, the man did not know.

There is a type of person who is never afraid to threaten the employee who dares not leave lest he or those near and dear to him may starve.

When, with a roar of the engine and a whirring of the wheels, the owner of the car drove off, Peter stood looking after him, and, as the red tail-light disappeared at the corner of the avenue, he shook his head.

"He sure has got the temper of the devil, and he drives like him, too," he muttered, "and it seems to me as if it was one of the devil's own errands he's on to-night. I don't like the looks of it,—I'll be darned if I do! However, it ain't none of my business! So long as I get my pay from him I've got to keep my mouth shut!"

After which sage observation he sighed and turned his steps toward home.

In spite of his haste, Ralph Morton stopped once on his way through the village of Homewood. He got out of his car and went into a hardware shop. The proprietor was just putting up his shutters, but ceased his task as he saw a chance customer enter. Mr. Morton's

manner moved the salesman to wait on him with alacrity. He evidently knew just what he wanted, and wanted it in a hurry.

When Ralph emerged from the shop he carried in his hand a long, slender object, which he deposited as well as he could in the bottom of the car. Although he bent it almost double, it still protruded at one side. As he drove off the proprietor stood, as Peter had done, and looked after the car and its occupant, muttering.

“What in thunder does he want with a horse-whip in an automobile?” he wondered.

At the same time Ralph, glancing down at the tasseled end of his recent purchase, murmured:

“I may not need it—but if other things fail I’ll use it!”

The hypocrite or the liar is likely to prove himself a coward when forced to contemplate the probability of being faced by the evidences of his wrongdoing or deceit. Ralph Morton would have declared himself to be a brave man. Certainly he had not hesitated to run great risks to advance his own interests. But to dare and to be brave are not one and the same thing.

As he drove to-night, alone with his thoughts,

he suddenly found himself afraid, horribly afraid, of the exposures that his cousin might make. Desperation, the unreasoning fear of an almost trapped animal, possessed him, as, holding the steering wheel tightly, he watched the yellow road slip toward him in the glare of his headlights. One thought alone he clung to with hope. He must keep Tom Morton from going to the Hale home.

How to do this he did not know, but he was determined to use every effort in his power to check his cousin. He would persuade, command, intimidate—yet he knew now, as he had known every minute of the evening, that none of these things would change Tom in his course. Well, then, he would maim him—even, if necessary, kill him. There was a wild, menacing glitter in his eyes as plan after plan surged through his mind and broke into the froth of impracticability.

Suddenly he threw on his brakes and brought his car to a stop. He was well outside the town now. The white pathway cut into the darkness by the acetylene lamps shone along the road leading to the New York ferry. Tom must come this way. He would wait for him

here. With fingers that trembled, Ralph lit a cigarette, then stepped down into the road. In his hand he held the slender whip he had bought a few minutes ago.

Fortune had favored him lately, he reminded himself, to calm his nerves. Of course she would help him in this crisis. If not—he set his lips in a hard line to prevent their twitching—he would help himself. The tip of his cigarette glowed hotly in the darkness as he drew in a quick breath and looked about him calculatingly.

A little ahead of him the road curved sharply; behind him was another turn where it crossed a narrow bridge. He knew that he could recognize Tom's low, red speed-car as soon as it should shoot around the corner into the glare of his own lights. He seated himself on the running board of his machine and waited, whip in hand. Tom Morton always drove fast. He would surely hurry this evening.

The brook gurgled and chuckled loudly beneath the bridge. To the left, above the trees, the searchlight of a Hudson River boat swept across the sky. The night was very still. All at once, far away to the south, a low drone

caused a rift in the silence. The man looked at his watch, then slunk back into the darkness behind his car. The drone grew into a hum, the hum into the approaching roar of a speeding car. A growing beam of light shone around the curve on the trees at the side of the road. The man crouching in the darkness grasped his whip more tightly.

A car swung into the glare of his headlights—a low roadster with a single occupant; a warning scream sounded from its horn as it rushed forward, cut-out open, roaring like a machine gun.

As it flashed past, a figure sprang out from behind the waiting automobile. For the fraction of a second the light shone full upon him, photographing for an instant the upraised arm. The sudden, sharp hiss of a lash cut the air, and the man in the car cried out hoarsely. His voice was drowned in the ear-splitting crash as his car, swerving to one side, burst through the guard-rail of the little bridge. There was the splash of water, the groan of tortured metal, then silence.

Ralph Morton stood motionless in the middle of the road, listening with every nerve taut.

Then, twisting the whip double, he thrust it into his automobile, and, starting his engine, sprang into the driver's seat and sped down the road like a hunted creature whose one idea was flight.

Edith Hale sat tense and silent by her mother's side. Her hands were clasped tightly, and she gave seemingly respectful heed to the reminiscences with which the elder woman was trying to while away the time for herself and her child. Certainly the repetition of these oft-told incidents of a bygone day had the effect of taking the narrator's mind from the near-at-hand troubles and perplexities.

Hearing them did not have as happy results for the anxious girl. Not only had she heard them all before many times, but the most interesting story would not have held her attention under existing circumstances. Her thoughts were flying wildly from her lover to her father, stopping occasionally to touch the orphaned girl who had gone away so suddenly and so ungratefully.

The sound of a motor car on the driveway brought Edith to her feet.

"That's father now!" she exclaimed. "I must see him!"

Before her mother could check her she had run downstairs and out upon the veranda.

It was not the car of the master of the house that drew up at the front steps, as a voice that she scarcely recognized called to her:

"Is that you, Edith?"

"Yes, Ralph!" she answered tremulously. "Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing," he rejoined, stepping from his car to meet her as she came down the steps. But he drew her to one side so that the light from the hall did not shine on his face. "I merely thought that perhaps it would be as well for me to be here when Tom came. Is he here yet?"

"No," the girl told him, "he hasn't come—and—oh,—Ralph!—Constance has gone!"

"Gone!" the other repeated blankly.

"Yes," Edith quavered, "gone—run away, perhaps. Father is out in his car now looking for her. Oh, Ralph—it is terrible! Suppose people learn of it! Think of the talk it will make!"

"But where has she gone?" he insisted.  
"Didn't she leave any word—any message?"

"No!" Edith replied. Then, her self-control snapping under the strain put upon it for the past hour, she dropped her head upon her lover's shoulder and burst into sobs.

Although Ralph put his arm around her and kissed her, the action was mechanical, for his mind was working swiftly. He was suddenly himself again.

"Perhaps," he said at last, in a steady voice, "that is why Tom Morton has not come."

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Constance Medford stood irresolute at the corner of the street on which the Hale home was situated. To her left the New York road stretched through the blue gloom of the starlit night. Below, at the foot of the hill to the right, the lights of the village glowed. The tall elms, arched overhead, cast deep shadows over and above her. With a woman's impulsive acceptance of an unproved idea as a fact, she had rushed from the house to meet and warn Tom Morton. Feminine intuition had brought her out here and had now as abruptly deserted her.

She stood hesitating in an agony of indecision. How was she to find Tom? What would she tell him if she did find him? What real cause had she for suspecting Ralph? These questions assailed her and she could answer none of them. She began to have a childishly guilty feeling. What would her uncle and aunt say if they knew she had gone out alone into the street? Perhaps they had already discov-

ered her flight and were even now searching for her.

She glanced back at the house apprehensively and congratulated herself that her dark cloak and veil made her seem one with the tree shadows. She shivered and drew her wrap more closely around her. The night was cool and she seemed to have been standing here for a long time. What a fool's errand she had come on! With a movement of determination she started a few steps toward the house she had just left, then drew back as quickly into the shadows and stood still on the alert.

Footsteps had sounded on the pavement across the street. A man was strolling slowly up the hill. As he passed under a street lamp, she recognized him as the village policeman. Far down the New York road she heard the regular beat of a horse's hoofs. The man across the street had heard the sound too, and, stopping on the corner opposite Constance, waited.

A buggy turned into Homewood Avenue, and as the lantern swinging from the dashboard shone upon the policeman the driver reined in his horse.

"Hello, Hen!" he called, facetiously. "What yer doin'? Huntin' burglars?"

"Hello, Ed!" the other returned, sedately. "Fine night, ain't it?"

"It's all of that," the man in the buggy agreed. "Had a smash-up down the road, I see."

"Hadn't heard of it," replied the policeman. "Ottermobile?"

"Yeah. Must of skidded, I guess. Bust clean through the rail of the Stony Brook bridge and lit in the stream bed. Ain't nobody there now. I hollered, but nobody didn't answer. I guess they've walked back to the ferry. They left their tail-light burning, so there ain't no danger."

"More than most of them do," remarked the other. "Durn fools! Well, good-night, Ed! Be good!"

"So long, Hen!"

The buggy rattled down the street. The policeman yawned widely and strolled back down the hill. Had he turned his head he might have been amazed by the sight of a slight figure, wrapped in a dark cloak, running swiftly down the road toward New York.

The terror that Constance had felt earlier in the evening had seized her again as she overheard the conversation between the two men. The unreasoning instinct that had driven her from the house sent her, panic-stricken, down the New York road to the Stony Brook bridge. She ran until every breath was a pain, then walked until she could once more breathe deeply, when she broke again into a run.

Unused to being abroad at night unattended, she forgot the nameless dangers which women and children fear when alone in the darkness and silence of out of doors. Once a car sped toward her and she shrank back in the deep shade of the roadside until the runabout had passed. With her subconscious mind she thought the figure in the car was familiar, but, possessed as she was by one idea, she forgot it as soon as it had passed.

By a strange psychosis which some masculine minds cannot understand, Constance Medford was convinced that it was Tom Morton's automobile which lay, overturned, beneath the shattered bridge rail; moreover that Tom Morton lay beside it, senseless, perhaps dead. Her head swam and her feet stumbled, yet she kept right

on, her breath coming in heavy sob-like gasps.

She was careless now of what her uncle and his family might think or do, of what Tom might think could he know all she was suffering for him. She only knew that she loved this man; that she was not ashamed to admit this to herself, and that he was in danger, perhaps beyond all help! Her feet began to drag and catch on the stones of the road. From the village behind her a clock struck ten. Once more she rallied her tired body and broke into a run.

Mr. Hale was a man who did not often waver in a decision, yet he wavered to-night. And 'as he was a man he was not supposed to yield to the proverbial feminine weakness of changing his mind. Yet to-night he did even this. As his chauffeur drove, at his bidding, towards the ferry, John Hale abruptly countermanded his orders of a moment before. What a fool he had been, he mused, not to have questioned the station agent about Constance, instead of driving along the public road in this way in search of her. Moreover, while this was the main carriage and automobile thoroughfare to the ferry, the girl might have chosen a short cut if she had

decided to take a boat to the city. Yet why should she do this when she could have gone so much more quickly by train? If she had behaved in such an ungrateful and wrong way she deserved to be talked about. Anxiety was telling on John Hale's temper, and he spoke harshly.

"Turn around!" he ordered. "Drive back to the station. I will question the agent about the person I am looking for."

"No," the agent told him five minutes later, "I haven't seen anybody from your house come in here this evening."

"A pretty mess!" John Hale grumbled as he climbed back into his car. "I may as well tell you, Robert, that Miss Medford has started for town, and I want to stop her. Ask me no questions," as the man looked at him in amazement.

"No, sir, I won't," said the chauffeur, suppressing any evidence of the curiosity he felt. As he was driving the car slowly toward the Hale home, having received no further orders from his master, he offered a respectful, almost apologetic suggestion. "Excuse me, sir," he

said, "but there's Hen Mickens coming along. Perhaps he's seen her."

"Stop then!" commanded Mr. Hale. But to his guarded question as to whether the policeman had seen "anyone from his house pass recently," Mickens replied in the negative.

"But," added the official, rejoicing like all of his type in the opportunity to impart information, "if any of your folks was ottermobil-ing perhaps you'd be interested in seein' the wreck down by Stony Brook bridge."

Yet, when he had told all he had heard about the wreck, Mr. Hale seemed to ignore his presence, for, turning abruptly to his chauffeur, he issued a brief order.

"Drive down the road to New York!" he said quickly and with a decision that left no chance for questioning.

John Hale's automobile throbbed its way along the New York road. The owner sat in the tonneau, besieged by a host of unpleasant imaginings and gloomy conjectures. He was tormented by thoughts of Constance's indiscretion and ingratitude, of his daughter's future, of the gossiping proclivities of his neighbors, of the absurdity of his decision to take this

route. He was ashamed already of the sharp stab of fear that had moved him to tell his chauffeur to drive to the Stony Brook bridge. Just because the village policeman had spoken of an automobile accident he, John Hale, supposed to be a sane, clear-headed individual, had rushed off on another wild goose chase!

With a movement of impatience at his own vacillation, he leaned forward to speak to his chauffeur, then uttered a sudden ejaculation of warning and lurched heavily to one side of the seat as Robert threw on the brakes and brought the car to a sliding standstill. Just ahead, the slim form of a woman stood erect in the glare of the lights. The brilliancy hid from her sight the faces of the occupants of the car, but she hurried forward, and spoke to them before she saw them.

"If you please," she gasped, "come and help me! There's a man here who has been terribly hurt. You must carry him to a doctor at once. Hurry, please!"

"Constance!" John Hale exclaimed as he recognized the speaker. "What are you doing here?"

Suspicion and anger mingled with astonish-

ment in his tones, but the girl took no heed of them. Her fear and agitation were too great for her to notice her uncle's manner or to wonder at his presence.

"Oh, I'm glad it is you," she said. "I've been trying to lift Tom, but I can't. He's had an accident, and is badly hurt. Uncle, I'm afraid——"

But her uncle interrupted her angrily. Ralph's insinuations returned to him again, and he spoke harshly. "And you," he said, "what are you doing here? How dare you leave us as you did! Your poor aunt is——"

The girl threw out her arm to check him. There was a strange abandonment in the gesture.

"For God's sake," she burst forth, "don't stop to talk! Tom may be dying, I tell you—dying! What do I matter—what does anything else matter now! Only help him. Robert!" she turned to the chauffeur almost passionately as she saw her uncle hesitate. "Robert, come and help me get him into the car! We may be killing him by standing here talking!"

Without a glance at his employer the chauffeur leaped from his seat and ran with the girl

down into the gully from which the red tail-light of a car glared balefully. Clambering down after the pair, Mr. Hale heard the splashing of water and the short, difficult breathing of one struggling with a heavy weight. Yet he was too dazed to offer to help the man when, a minute later, he staggered into the stream of white light that flowed from the lamps, dragging, rather than lifting, a dark, limp form.

"Good Lord!" Mr. Hale groaned as he caught sight of the ghastly face, spattered and streaked with blood.

"Give me a hand here, please sir!" the chauffeur ordered.

Without a word the master helped his employee as, directed by Constance, he lifted the senseless weight into the car.

"Put him in the tonneau, Robert," Constance commanded. "Careful! There—put his head on this cushion. That's right! Uncle, you sit in front, please. I'll sit here and hold him. Drive to Dr. Sheffield's, Robert, as fast as you can."

And this was the creature who, nervous and shaken, had faced him in his library but a few short hours ago! What mighty emotion had

worked this change in her? Once during the drive back to Homewood Avenue the elderly man turned to speak to his niece, but the dim impression that he received of the slender girl clinging to the limp figure that swayed and jerked with the motion of the car silenced him. A feeling of wondering compassion was conquering him in spite of his puzzled disapproval of his niece's actions.

Yet he spoke gruffly when the car stopped at Dr. Sheffield's house.

"Here, Constance," he said, "Robert and I will lift Tom. Go on ahead and see if the doctor is in."

When the wounded man had been carried into the physician's inner office, and Constance and her uncle in the waiting-room were listening to the muffled sounds on the other side of the closed folding doors, John Hale again asked a question.

"Constance," he ventured, "will you try to tell me what this means?"

His niece sat opposite him, pale and immobile. She did not turn her head when he spoke, but watched the closed doors with fixed intent-

ness. When she answered her voice was monotonous and low.

“Please don’t talk to me now, uncle,” she said. “I can’t argue or explain yet. If I try to I—I can’t stand it——”

She shuddered and her voice broke. Yet a moment later she had regained her self-control and once more watched silently the closed doors.

After what seemed an interminable period the physician entered the room.

“The patient is very badly hurt,” he announced gravely, in response to the question in the eyes of uncle and niece. “Just how badly I do not know certainly yet. A collar-bone is broken, there is a bad scalp wound and a slight concussion. Whether he is injured internally or not I cannot say until I have had a consultation. There is also a heavy welt right across the bridge of the nose, just below the eyes. I don’t understand how he got that. His face may have struck the windshield when the car was ditched, but that would have left a bruise—at least I should think so—and not a mark like this.

“One would acutally think he had been lashed straight across the face with a whip. But of

course that is not possible. Still, the fact remains that the mark is a welt—not a bruise. I confess that I do not understand it!”

Looking back later, Constance Medford had some difficulty in recalling the occurrences of that dreadful evening on which Tom Morton was injured. She remembered how she had fled from her uncle's house down the long road to Stony Brook, how she had peered into the brook from the broken bridge and, at first, had seen nothing but the overturned car. She had thought for a moment that the man who had told of the accident had been right when he said that the owner of the wrecked automobile had gone back to town. Yet, as she gazed more deeply into the darkness below her, she discerned a shape huddled against the under side of the car, and, without a moment's hesitation, climbed down the muddy bank and groped about in the weeds and water to ascertain what this shape was.

Evidently the car, in its plunge through the railing, had thrown the driver from the seat. He had struck his head against some sharp stones and, while his body had been partly sub-

merged in the stream, these same rocks had held his head above the water.

She could also recall how she had tried to move the body, then how, hearing a car coming, she had clambered back up the bank and into the road with the one idea of stopping the driver even if she must stand directly in his path to do so.

Yet, hazy as some of her after recollections were, her manner was calm and self-possessed through the following scenes of the evening. It was decided that Tom should be taken at once to the Homewood Hospital, where a consultation would be held. John Hale had suggested that the patient might be brought to his home, but Dr. Sheffield vetoed this plan.

"He will be better off in the hospital," the physician declared. "I have telephoned to have everything in readiness for him there. The ambulance will come for him in a few minutes. I would advise"—with a glance at Constance—"that you take this young lady home now. Neither you nor she can do any good by remaining here longer. I will telephone to you later the result of the consultation."

Constance Medford offered no demur. Tom

was in safe hands—all she could do now was to wait. That was, she thought dully, a part of a woman's work in the world—to do all that she could, then step aside and let those more able than she take her place while she awaited the result of the work which she had begun, but from which she was now excluded.

She sat silent while her uncle telephoned Edith that he had met Constance and would bring her home with him. She also heard him order his daughter to ask no questions, but to tell her mother that everything was all right, then go to bed.

"I think perhaps you would prefer seeing nobody to-night," he explained briefly, as he returned to Constance. "I will have a talk with you in the morning. Now your best plan would be to come home and try to sleep. Your feet and clothes are damp and muddy, and you should change your wet things for dry ones as soon as possible. I do not understand this evening's happenings, but you may be able to explain some of them to me in the morning."

The girl said nothing until her uncle had assisted her from the car at his own house. Then,

as he started to open the door, she looked up at him pleadingly.

"Surely," she asked, "you will let me know what you hear from the hospital before I go to bed?"

"Yes, yes," her uncle replied hastily. "I will come to your door and tell you as soon as I learn anything new."

"Thank you," she said. Then she laid her hand on his arm. "Uncle," she faltered, her deep gray eyes looking up into his grave face, "I am sorry to have given you all this trouble."

The chauffeur had driven around to the garage and the pair stood facing each other. One of the servants had extinguished the lights in the front hall, supposing that all the family were upstairs. A touch of the electric button would have flooded the vestibule with light, but the master of the house did not touch it. The moon had risen within the past hour, and was now shining above the treetops on the eastern side of the broad lawn. Its radiance lighted up the pale face of the slender girl, and as her companion looked down at her his eyes softened.

"Constance," he said, "poor child—don't thank me—only tell me the truth!"

She caught her breath sharply. "I have always tried to do that, uncle," she murmured.

"Then," he urged, laying a hand on her shoulder, "tell me if you were trying to run away from my home to-night—and from us who have loved you."

"Oh, no!" she protested. "I had no thought of running away—why—how could I?"

John Hale drew a long sigh of relief; then a painful suspicion presented itself once more, as it had done earlier in the evening.

"Forgive me," he said brusquely, "if I ask you another question. Did you know that Tom was coming out here to-night?"

"Yes," she replied. He waited for her to say more but as she remained silent he put to her another question—the one that was burning to be asked, and yet from which his soul recoiled.

"Can you," he began; then stopped. "Oh, my dear," he burst forth with a gesture of exasperation; "I hate to ask it, but I want you to say that you did not steal out of the house

to-night with the thought in mind of—I mean that you did not go out to meet Tom!”

There was a moment of intense stillness. The girl still gazed into the keen eyes above her. When she spoke all hope had died from her voice.

“I cannot say that, uncle,” she replied. “For it would be a lie, and you have asked for the truth. I did go out of this house to meet Tom. I can’t explain any more just now, but——”

The kindly hand fell from her shoulder, and with a swift motion John Hale switched on the electric light above him. His eyes flashed angrily as he looked at the trembling girl.

“No,” he said, “don’t explain anything. There is no need of it. You would better go to your room instead.”

And, opening the door, he motioned to her to go into the house ahead of him.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

With feverish haste Constance Medford prepared for the night. Weary and spent, she felt that the only relief in store for her was to lose consciousness in sleep. She kept telling herself that she must not think, and all the while her thoughts chased each other disconnectedly through her brain. Keenly alive to every sound in the house, she fancied she heard the telephone ring downstairs, but would not allow herself to pause in the brushing of her hair to listen.

When, a little later, her uncle's light tap sounded on her door, she started violently, and her hands trembled as she fastened the wrapper which she threw about her before going to receive his message.

"I promised," John Hale said in a low voice, "to tell you what I heard from the hospital. Dr. Sheffield just rang me up to say that there is little that is new to report. The patient has partially recovered consciousness and seems to be suffering much pain. There may be, as the

doctor has already told us, some internal injury. Yet the heart is strong—and the patient may recover.”

The door closed and he was gone without waiting to hear the girl's faltering “Thank you!” She stood for a long while just where he had left her. She longed to rush wildly after him, to throw herself upon his breast, to beg him to tell her if he thought Tom was going to live. Twenty-four hours ago she could have done this to the elderly man who, she had believed then, loved her. Now she could not. She was resentful as she recalled how he had spoken of Tom only as “the patient,” just as he might have spoken of the most casual stranger. What was the matter? What had Tom done? What had she done to merit such treatment?

Going into her dressing-room she dashed cold water over her face and neck. She must try to cool her brain, to see matters more clearly. She braided her hair, put on her night-gown, and knelt, as she had always done since babyhood, at the side of her bed to say her prayers. She repeated the familiar words, but they meant nothing to her. At last, with a sigh

that was almost a sob, she exclaimed: "Oh, Lord, I am too tired to pray! You know that!" and rose from her knees.

Who would dare assert that this prayer did not reach the Divine ear, and that the Lord did not know and understand?

Throwing herself upon her bed, the weary girl tried to sleep. But it was in vain. Conjecture, memories, fear stabbed her to vivid consciousness whenever a sense of drowsiness stole over her. She knew she had a painful problem to face and she could not sleep until she had faced it. Finally, her eyes staring straight before her, she whipped her jaded mind to the task of thinking connectedly, instead of flying from one subject to another as it had been doing for the past hour.

The moonlight was so bright now that she could dimly trace the outline of the pattern on the wall paper on which her eyes were fixed. Little by little she reviewed the events of the day and evening. She recalled every word of Edith's insinuations, then she remembered Mr. Hale's accusing query just before he opened the front door for her a while ago.

What did father and daughter suspect?

What did they believe of her and Tom? She had pushed this question from her again and again. Now she forced herself to answer it. Her uncle's query and his ensuing anger made the matter so plain that she could not deceive herself about it any longer. And as she looked at the naked facts of his suspicions and of Edith's suggestions, planted, Constance knew, by Ralph, she uttered a moan of anguish.

Could anyone who knew her believe such things of her? Hot waves of shame and of rage engulfed her and she felt as if she were drowning in a sea of misery. Only a pure-minded, straightforward woman, whose life had been protected from the very shadow of evil, could understand this girl's suffering.

The hours dragged away while she lay fighting her battle alone. And all at once the tempest was succeeded by a strange calm. She was no longer a young and frightened girl, she told herself, but a woman who must meet life as it had been forced upon her through no fault of her own. She thought she was calm, yet underneath the hot fire of resentment still burned.

When at last the birds began to herald the coming of the day she had reached a decision.

She could see the first step she must take. She would tell her uncle of this first step when he sent to her for an "explanation." She would give him no explanation. If he could think such evil of her she would not stoop to deny it.

She was young—and reached this decision without counting the cost. Youth is strong and swift to resent and to punish an injustice.

It had been a wonderfully light night since she had come to her room, she mused, as, rising wearily from her bed, she closed the blinds to shut out the dawn. A cool wind had sprung up, and she shivered as it blew against her body. She felt strangely weak and her bones ached. She must sleep, or she might be ill here in this house which she was determined to leave so soon. Now that she had reached a decision, she could surely forget her troubles for a while.

In a way painfully familiar to the sufferer from insomnia, she beat up and turned over her pillows before lying down again. The action brought to her mind the recollection of how, when as a little girl she had had some childish illness, her mother had "smoothed" her pillows for her, and with the remembrance

came a gush of merciful tears—relieving the tension of the overstrained nerves.

“Oh, mother! mother!” the girl sobbed, burying her face in the bed clothing that the sound of her passionate weeping might not be heard. “If I only had you now! If you were only here!”

Perhaps her mother was there. For, an hour later, when Mrs. Hale, worrying about “that child,” stole softly to the door and opened it noiselessly, Constance was lying, fast asleep, with a smile almost of contentment on her lips.

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” Mrs. Hale muttered as she returned to her own room, “for John wouldn’t talk about it last night. But this morning I intend to learn what the matter is.”

“Constance must not be disturbed,” Mrs. Hale had said to her husband and daughter when she summoned them to breakfast that morning. The maids were warned to “make no noise for fear of awakening Miss Constance, who was not well.” The aunt’s one thought seemed to be for her niece’s physical comfort.

Yet, when the morning meal was over and the family were alone together after the waitress had left the dining-room, the wife said decidedly: "Now, John, I want to know what all this mystery and disturbance mean."

"I want you to know," her husband replied promptly. "I shall not go to town before eleven o'clock. I wish you and Edith to come with me into the library for a serious talk."

As soon as the trio were seated in the library the master of the house imparted to the shocked women the news of Tom's accident. Distressed as Mrs. Hale was to hear of the catastrophe, this distress sank into insignificance compared with her grief and pained incredulity when she learned of what her husband and daughter accused her niece. Edith added her bit of information to the effect that Ralph had come back last night to meet Tom and had, with what she termed his "wonderful insight," guessed at once that Constance had gone to meet his cousin.

"And you see he was right," the girl insisted, a gleam of triumph in her eyes. "He could not stay until your return, father, for his mother was ill—in spite of your assertions to the con-

trary. I asked him if Peter had not said that his mother needed him, and I reported to him what Mrs. Morton's maid had told you—and he said that the girl had told you that because his mother did not want anyone to know she was worse. Edward Dayton must have been mistaken in thinking that he met Ralph walking, for Ralph was in his car and had just been down to the village to get something from the drug-store for his mother.”

“That is all beside the question!” said Mr. Hale irritably. “What is of infinitely more importance than what Ralph did or said last night is the fact that circumstantial evidence shows that Constance has deceived us.”

Of course, Mrs. Hale protested that she “did not believe it,” and that “it could not be true,” but at last, after hearing all the evidence, was compelled to acknowledge that she “simply could not understand it.”

“My only hope,” said her husband, “is that Constance may explain some seemingly inexplicable things and deny the charges against her.”

“If she is innocent she will deny them,” said Edith judicially—“but I fear she cannot.”

Meanwhile Ralph Morton had received his morning's mail and with it the letter from Tom Morton, written yesterday afternoon, demanding that he come into town to see him.

His face paled as he read it, for he had not slept well last night and was nervous this morning. A sudden idea occurred to him. He would stop at his fiancée's house on his way to the station. He told his mother a hasty good-by—congratulating her upon looking so well this morning, and felt no pangs of conscience for having lied about her condition last night.

He had a part to act, and he must act it well. He rehearsed it mentally on his brisk walk to the Hale home where the maid ushered him into the library. As he wished to have his stage-setting correct, he glanced eagerly at the open hearth. He knew that it was Mrs. Hale's custom to have a fire lighted here each morning, even after Spring had arrived. To-day was unusually cool for this time of year, and the logs were blazing merrily.

"Good morning," he said to the group gathered here, then, without further preamble, turned quickly to his host. "You found Constance, didn't you?" he said, with apparent

anxiety. "Edith telephoned a guarded message to me to that effect last night. I confess that since the receipt of this letter from Tom just now, I am surprised to know that she returned."

He drew Tom's envelope from his pocket and held it so that each person present recognized Tom Morton's bold chirography. "And did Tom come too?" he asked abruptly.

"No," said Mr. Hale; "he——"

"Ah, I thought not!" Ralph interrupted him. "When I read this I was sure of it. But how did their plans miscarry—his and Constance's, I mean, so that she came back last night instead of——"

He stopped as if checking himself on the verge of the admission of some shameful secret. "I would like to know," he added more cautiously, coming closer to Mr. Hale and dropping his voice, "what message Tom sent you to account for his absence. I must know before I show you his letter."

Mr. Hale spoke sternly, with no effort to soften what might be a blow to the cousin of the injured man. "He sent no message, Ralph," he said. "He could not—for he had a bad acci-

dent. He is fearfully hurt—is in the hospital—he may die.”

The pallor that swept over Ralph Morton's face was not the result of acting. The words “may die” staggered him. But he did not forget the rôle he had laid out for himself.

“Accident!” he gasped. “Tom—hurt—Tom—in the hospital! Oh, why didn't you send for me? Why didn't you let me know?”

“What would have been the use?” Mr. Hale rejoined more kindly. “You could have done nothing. He was in competent hands.”

The young man stood for a moment as if stunned. Then he looked at the letter he still held. John Hale, seeing the look, held out his hand.

“Let me see that letter,” he demanded. “You were going to show it to me.”

But Ralph drew back. “Oh, no!” he exclaimed. “I can't now! Oh, poor Tom!”

Mr. Hale moved impatiently. “Tom's accident has not altered his character,” he declared. “If there is anything in that letter that I”—he hesitated—“that I, as Miss Medford's uncle, should know—I have a right to see it.”

Before anyone present could guess his intention, Ralph stepped quickly to the open fireplace and dropped the letter into the heart of the leaping flames. As John Hale, with an exclamation of dismay, sprang forward to snatch at the blazing paper, the young man laid a strong hand on his arm.

"Don't sir!" he said sternly. "Tom is hurt—he may die—nobody must ever know what was in that letter."

For a moment nobody spoke. Then as the burning paper turned to gray ashes Ralph Morton looked at his host.

"Forgive me, sir," he said. "It is better so. You see—Tom is my cousin, and"—with a break in his voice—"I once loved him and trusted him."

John Hale held out his hand, "You are a noble man, Ralph," he replied huskily. "I seem never to have known you until now."

"I am not noble, sir," Ralph protested, returning the cordial handclasp but dropping his eyes before the frank admiration in the gaze of the other man. "It is only what any fellow would have done. Why, Edith!" his tone changing to tenderness as he glanced at his

betrothed, "why, little girl, what are you crying about?"

He put his arm about her and drew her to him, glad, perhaps, of an excuse to let go of his host's honest hand. The host himself looked away hastily. He might be willing to acknowledge that he had been mistaken in this man's character, might be willing to accept him as his daughter's suitor—but that father does not exist who does not feel a chill of repulsion when, for the first time, he sees his best-loved child in the arms of the man who is to take her away from him.

Edith gazed up into her lover's eyes. "I'm silly to cry, I suppose," she whispered, "but you are so fine, so splendid!"

Mrs. Hale's matter-of-fact accents broke in upon the sentimentality of the occasion. "Nevertheless," she said, with cold practicality, "I think that we have a right to know what was in that letter."

"I am sorry, my dear Mrs. Hale," rejoined Ralph, releasing Edith and replying to her mother's suggestion, "but I cannot tell anyone what was in that letter. If Tom dies"—he paused as if the idea were painful to him—

“nobody must ever know what he wrote me. If he lives—I cannot betray his secret. Had he not had this accident matters would have been different, for then he could have faced us all, if need be, and defended himself. As it is, he was not allowed to carry out his designs. To tell what they were would be to punish him and—another—for what did not happen.”

“And that ‘other’ was—whom?” Mrs. Hale insisted. “Do you mean to intimate that my niece knows the contents of that letter?”

John Hale looked at his wife in surprise. He thought he understood her every mood, but until now he had never seen her when one of her own sex whom she loved and had trusted was accused of that which was degrading to her womanhood.

“Martha, my dear,” he protested, “this is not the kind of matter of which you wish to know more. Personally, I have heard and seen enough to convince me, against my will, that we have been mistaken in the character of the niece you loved——”

He stopped abruptly, for the door opened quietly and Constance stood before them. For months afterward John Hale could not erase

from his memory the girl's face and attitude as she stood looking from one to the other of the group. She had put on a black street dress—for she still wore mourning—and the soft black tulle that filled in the open triangle at the throat accentuated her clear pallor. Her deep gray eyes seemed larger and darker than usual because of the shadowy rings around them—rings caused by long hours of sleeplessness. Her chestnut hair was coiled low at the back of her shapely head, and her lips drooped slightly at the corners, giving a plaintive, pensive expression to the sensitive mouth.

She resembled strangely a well-known presentment of Joan of Arc by an Italian sculptor. Anyone gazing at her would have found it difficult to believe that a smirch of scandal could ever touch this refined creature. Yet as her glance rested upon Ralph the soft lines of her mouth hardened and she took a step toward her uncle.

"I knocked, but you did not hear me," she said simply. "I waited upstairs for you to send for me, but as you did not do so I have taken the liberty of coming unsummoned. May



SHE RESEMBLED STRANGELY A WELL-KNOWN PRESENTMENT OF JOAN  
OF ARC BY AN ITALIAN SCULPTOR



I speak with you alone—at least”—with a catch in her breath—“with only aunt present?”

The usually sweet and *trainante* voice was this morning a dull monotone. Any compunction that had seized John Hale as he saw the solitary and pathetic figure in the doorway was changed to surprised disapproval by this speech.

“I think,” he said coldly, “that your temper has not been improved by a night of reflection if you can still cherish such anger against your cousin and her betrothed that you ask me to send them out of your presence.”

The retort went straight home, but Constance had steeled herself to maintain a stony calm. “I only meant, uncle,” she explained, “that I prefer telling my plans to those who are truly interested in me. May I see you alone?”

Mrs. Hale rose from her chair. “I am sorry, Constance,” she said, with an effort to speak sternly, “that you are so angry with Edith. She, poor child, was very unhappy about you last night.”

“I am sorry I made anybody unhappy last night,” Constance rejoined, still in an emotionless tone. “I did not intend to do so.”

“Constance!” her aunt appealed to her suddenly and impulsively. “What did you intend to do last night? I don’t want to believe what I’ve heard!”

But John Hale interposed before his wife could say any more. “If you please, Martha,” he said with dignity, “I prefer that you leave this matter with me. I know enough already to prove to you that Constance has deceived us. If you will leave her with me now, she and I will come to an understanding. Perhaps,” with a reproachful look at the black-clad figure, “I may then hear from her that which Ralph’s nobility has prevented his telling us of her assignation with Tom last night.”

The flood of crimson that sprang to the accused girl’s face retreated as quickly, leaving her paler than before. “What do you mean?” she demanded, turning swiftly upon Ralph. “What do you mean, I say?”

“My lips are sealed by a sense of honor,” the man replied significantly.

The answer struck a blaze of wrath from what had seemed a moment before like the flint of this girl’s composure. She smote her hands sharply together.

“Honor!” she exclaimed. “Honor—from you!”

And as she saw the malignant gleam in the man’s eyes, she burst into a scornful laugh.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

A man may have a quick temper, but his ability to control it depends largely on his physical and nervous state. That which he would regard at one time as a mere annoyance will at another time cause him to give vent to sudden passion. While John Hale had a hot temper, he usually had no trouble in concealing any undue manifestation of its existence.

This morning, however, the case was different. Anxiety, a restless night, disagreeable surprises, had contributed to put him in a condition where Constance's words had the power to make him very nearly forget the fact that he was a gentleman and that this girl was under his roof. His wife, seeing the light of anger leap to his eyes, noting the sudden clenching of his hands and the stiffening of the muscles of his mouth and chin, knew that a storm was not only brewing, but was about to break. With a brief command to her daughter and Ralph to come with her, she retreated with as much haste as was consistent with dignity, leav-

ing what she thought of as "this horrible mess" to be settled by her husband and her niece.

She was the more willing to do this as she found herself all at once incensed by Constance's attitude. She had tried to plead kindly with the girl and had met with no response. How could she know that Constance's only safety lay in maintaining her self-imposed poise and that had she allowed herself to reply to her aunt her composure would have vanished? Moreover, Mrs. Hale's maternal love was wounded by Constance's manner toward Edith and Edith's betrothed. All these facts made her feel justified in retreating from the scene of conflict.

The door had hardly closed behind Ralph, who had stood aside to allow the ladies to pass out before him, when Constance spoke, her tone so humble as to be in conspicuous contrast to the voice in which she had resented Ralph's reply to her vehement demand.

"I beg your pardon, uncle," she said, "for speaking in your presence as I did just now. But I was justifiably angry—yet you know it was not at you."

There was no responsive softness in John

Hale's reply. On the contrary, his voice was sharp and rasping. He was intensely angry and he did not care if the object of his wrath knew it.

"I am not at all sure that I will accept your apology," he retorted. "I am so much displeased with you that I cannot talk to you or think of you with any patience. You have carried on a clandestine affair with a man to whom your cousin was engaged, have insulted my child, have forgotten your duty to your aunt and me by bursting into a rage against our guest and future son-in-law—have, in fact, behaved in such a manner that unless you are insane I see no excuse in the world for you!"

The girl at whom he addressed this tirade stood as if turned to stone. Her silence fanned his wrath. When one receives no reply to violent accusations one is conscious of a maddening sense of impotence. It is like beating the air with one's fists.

"Have you nothing to say?" queried the incensed man.

"Only to beg your pardon, sir, for my seeming ingratitude. I do not apologize for the

things you accuse me of, but I have been grateful, in spite of appearances to the contrary."

"Who's asking for gratitude?" stormed John Hale. "Don't dare suggest to me that I am looking for thanks from you! I have never thought of them and I don't expect them! But I do want you to explain to me your course lately; I do want you to tell me that the things which I have been told about you (which, please remember, I did not believe until I had to) are false. Can you deny them?"

He had not reckoned on the resentment of injustice in the breast of his opponent—for this is what for the moment he felt her to be—and he started with surprise at her reply.

"Whether I can deny them or not," she said, "I do not propose to do so. If you can believe me capable of the things of which you accuse me, nothing I might say could make any difference."

She faced him proudly for an instant, unflinching under his stern gaze. Then she spoke again.

"Even if I cannot say what you wish, I must say once more that I am grateful to you and aunt for all that you have done for me since I

came here. It is only fair to you both—and to Edith—that I do not stay here any longer. I would not leave without telling you—so I want you to know that I am going away to-day. I am aware,” hesitatingly, “that I am much in your debt—financially, I mean—for you have never allowed me to pay for my board and lodging. What I owe you for many kindnesses can never be repaid, but I hope some day to refund you for—for—other things.”

“This is sheer madness and wicked temper on your part, Constance!” the man began. She stopped him with an uplifted hand.

“I do not wish,” she said wearily, “to talk any longer about this matter. Will you explain it all to aunt for me—please?”

“Don’t make a fool of yourself, girl!” he blustered. But without waiting to hear anything more she went quickly from the room.

John Hale dropped into his desk-chair, and, leaning back, closed his eyes. He felt shaken and quivering. “I haven’t let myself get as angry as that for years,” he murmured. “And all for a chit of a girl! She won’t leave us—unless we send her away. No fear of that.

She's too smart to quarrel with her bread and butter yet awhile!"

Which sentiment only proved that he was still angry. Nor was he yet calm in mind when he caught the eleven o'clock train for New York.

Being a man, he did not understand feminine psychology, so he could hardly be expected to know that Constance had already packed her trunk, leaving in closets and bureau drawers all of the jewelry and clothing that the Hales had given her and taking with her only the articles with which she had come to their home.

At twelve o'clock, when Mrs. Hale and Edith had gone out for an hour's drive before luncheon to "quiet their nerves," Constance summoned a cab from the livery stable and had herself and her luggage carried to the railroad station.

But she left behind, on her aunt's dressing table, a little note of apology and affection. Her aunt, in reading it, noted regretfully—in spite of her indignant grief and agitation—that it contained no farewell message for "poor Edith."

Constance Medford's decision may have been the result of resentful impulse, but she had

planned her first step and could see it plainly. Beyond this she would not look just yet.

She was not penniless, for her expenses had been few and she had saved much of the money she had earned by giving music lessons. This was in the little bag which she grasped tightly as she alighted from the New York train. She remembered with a sense of gratitude that her patrons had been in the habit of paying her on the fifteenth of each month, and that only last week she had received almost all the money due her. This would support her until she could secure a few music pupils. She would drop a line to each of them to-night, saying that she had been called away, and advising them to secure some other teacher. At first she had thought of commuting to Homewood. In the light of recent events she felt she could not do this.

As a child, Constance Medford had had a governess of whom she was very fond. She was a Mrs. Blair—whose husband had died at the end of a year of wedded life. She had been a school friend of Constance's mother. For a while the young widow had barely supported herself by conducting a small kindergarten, but

when, under the strain of work and anxiety, her health broke down, Mrs. Medford had taken her to her home and nursed her back to health, then offered her the position of governess to her little daughter. This offer the widow accepted thankfully and became Constance's only instructor.

Even after Mrs. Medford's death Mrs. Blair continued to teach the motherless child, but when Constance was fourteen the conscientious governess began to fear that her methods were, perhaps, behind the times, and she wondered if it were not her duty to withdraw and allow her charge's education to be carried on by more competent persons than herself. The news that a distant relative of her own had died, leaving her his property—the income from which would enable her to live simply but comfortably—decided the matter for her, and she settled in a small apartment in New York. Here she had resided for years, satisfied with her books and charitable work, and here her former pupil often went to see her.

It was to Mrs. Blair's home that Constance directed her steps to-day as soon as she reached New York. As she rode uptown she tried to

forget that there was now no place in the world which she could feel she had a right to call "home." Perhaps the loneliest place in the world to the homeless man or woman is a great city. One feels apart from the busy, hustling throng all working for their own homes or to maintain homes for those they love. Constance felt a lump come in her throat as she faced the future, but she conquered the pang of self-pity and told herself that she was, after all, not so very desolate.

To her relief she found her old friend in, and laid before her the plan which she had formed. She would like, she said, to share Mrs. Blair's apartment—at least to be allowed to sleep on the couch in the hall bedroom until such time as she could secure enough music pupils to warrant her in taking a room in a respectable boarding house and hiring her own piano.

"You see I have plenty of money to pay you board for some weeks," she explained hurriedly, "and I am sure you will not object to my using your piano for practising—in fact, I would, of course, want to pay for the use of that too."

She talked fast and excitedly, telling the story she had outlined in the early morning hours. She told nothing that was not true, yet she withheld the truths that she could not bring herself to tell. She explained that for reasons which she could not divulge—"family reasons" she called them—she had decided to leave her uncle's home. She did not want anyone to know her whereabouts. Then she hesitated and blushed hotly. She would like, if possible, to have her new scholars know her by an assumed name.

But at this suggestion Mrs. Blair gasped so audibly that Constance stopped with a sudden appreciation of all that she had been demanding of this friend.

"Oh," she exclaimed contritely, "I have been so full of thoughts of myself that I have not thought of all the trouble I may cause you! Tell me frankly if you would rather not take me in."

"Dear child!" exclaimed the sweet-faced woman, "I want you here. I get very lonely sometimes—even though I am content with my lot. Think what your mother did for me. Should I not welcome her daughter as if she

were my very own? But, dear, you say you cannot tell me the family reasons that make this course advisable. Yet"—she colored painfully—"surely, if you are going to take an assumed name, there must be some reason."

She paused, overcome by embarrassment. "You know I trust you," she added.

With an impetuous movement Constance threw her arms about her companion and gazed into the kindly, troubled eyes. "Look at me," the girl said solemnly. "I give you my word of honor that I am doing nothing of which my mother or father would disapprove—if—if—they were here and knew the circumstances," her voice breaking suddenly.

The woman, who although childless, had a mother-heart, drew the girl's head down upon her breast and stroked the shining hair. "There, there, dear!" she soothed. "That's all right! Come and stay with me as long as you like. If there are things you can't tell me—never mind. And, dear, if you want to give references to the parents of your possible pupils—just give my name. It may not be worth much, but"—with a little laugh—"it is very

respectable, and you are welcome to use it as often as it can be of service to you."

Constance joined in her laugh, winking hard to dispel the tears that had sprung to her eyes—and the little joke seemed to clear the over-charged atmosphere. Later, when she went to the station to order her trunk sent to Mrs. Blair's apartment, she stepped into a telephone booth, and, calling up the Homewood Hospital, asked tremulously, in spite of her efforts to speak indifferently, how Mr. Morton was.

"He is resting more comfortably," the office attendant said. "Who shall I say asked?"

"Oh, never mind!" the girl replied hastily. Then she hung up the receiver and hurried from the booth as if afraid that her presence there might betray her identity to the official away out in the Homewood Hospital.

## Chapter Twenty

There is nearly always a deadly lull that follows upon agitation or excitement of any kind. Especially is this the case when the excitement has been of a painful nature, racking nerves and trying tempers. While one is in the midst of the turmoil there is a wild desire to escape it, but when it is all over and life returns to its uneventful calm one is suddenly overcome by *ennui* or saddened by the deadly monotony of existence.

Edith Hale was disagreeably aware of this state of affairs in her home during the days following upon Constance's departure. John Hale—with an authority which his wife and daughter did not dispute—directed them to inform the servants and any neighbors who might ask about Constance that the girl had not been well and had gone to visit friends in the hope that the change of air might be beneficial to her.

“Later,” the master of the house said, “when Constance gets tired of playing the fool and

lets us know her whereabouts—if she ever does—we can give some equally plausible excuse for her absence. For, of course, she must not return here.”

“Of course not!” rejoined his wife. Even while she wished that she knew where “the child” was she looked at Edith and hardened her heart against the offender. Yet she felt depressed as she set about to transform Constance’s room into the guest chamber that it had been before the girl’s advent into the home. Gathering up the various articles that her niece had left behind her, the aunt put them away in a box on the top shelf of her own closet.

She was ashamed to feel the tears rise to her eyes as she did this, and she told herself that it was only because she was remembering her poor sister—Constance’s mother.

“Up in Heaven, where she is now,” mused the pious soul, “she must know it is not our fault that Constance has behaved as she has. If the dead do know what goes on down here they must be mighty uncomfortable sometimes. And if they don’t know, they must be uneasy, too. That’s one thing about the state of the blessed that I never can understand, so why

think about it? I've got plenty of earthly things to bother me yet a while."

One of these "things" was her daughter's restlessness and moodiness. Probably the dear child was grieving over Constance's unkindness and was still suffering from the shock of Tom's treachery and accident. Indeed, only this morning Edith had betrayed what was on her mind by bringing to her mother the engagement ring that Tom had given her weeks ago.

"What shall I do with this?" she had asked, looking at it with an expression of aversion. "I don't want to keep it a minute longer. Suppose he dies!"

"You'd better ask father what he advises you to do," her mother counseled. Then she queried timidly: "By the way, dearie, has Ralph spoken yet of an engagement ring?"

The girl frowned. "Good heavens, mother!" she exclaimed petulantly, "do let me get over the wretchedness of one engagement before you talk about my being bound fast by another ring. Besides, I don't want to think about it now—certainly not until I get this hateful thing out of the house."

That evening she handed the ring to her father. "What shall I do with it?" she asked.

Mr. Hale did not reply at once, but turned the diamond this way and that, watching the beautiful stone flash in the light from the chandelier above him. He was a connoisseur in diamonds and he appreciated the beauty of this one. He felt a sudden pang almost like pity as he recalled how Tom Morton had shown it to him and how pleased the lad had seemed when the older man had expressed his admiration of his selection. Then, as suddenly, he remembered what had happened since then and his face grew stern.

"I will wrap it up and take it in to Tom's office and instruct his clerk to put it away in the safe," he said harshly. "Nobody will know what it is. Of course you want to get rid of it. It would have been in better taste had you returned it the very hour you broke your engagement."

"I have never worn it since then," the girl muttered sullenly.

"Where's Ralph this evening?" her father asked, attributing her unhappy demeanor to her lover's absence.

"A business man from the South is in town and could only see him to-night," she explained.

"That's too bad," sympathized the parent.

Edith shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, I don't mind so much," she said indifferently. "I've seen Ralph so often lately that we've both gotten talked out. I do wish there was something pleasant or interesting to do in this place! Thanks to Constance's behavior, the house is like a tomb. She, at all events, was fun to talk to—and she could at least amuse one by playing the piano. You're depressed, mother has the blues, and as for me—well, I'm bored to extinction!"

Her father looked at her keenly and disapprovingly. "I think, my dear," he remarked, "when one feels as you do it is a good plan to do something for somebody else or to go and see some one who is in real trouble or who needs cheering. It would help you to get out of your selfish thoughts if you did this. Why, instead of moping around the house as you have been doing for the past few days, don't you go and see some poor sick person—Ralph's mother, for instance? You said she was ill the other night, yet you haven't been near her."

"She'd only talk about Ralph and about her ailments all the time," the girl objected. "But I suppose, now that you speak of it, it would be the decent thing to do. But that will bore me, too."

The petulant tone irritated the man and he spoke testily. "You're spoiled to death, Edith," he declared. "That's what ails you! You're spoiled to death!"

"If I am," she retorted sharply, "who's fault is it, please?"

And before her astounded parent could find a reply to her apt question she walked away, leaving him staring blankly at the open doorway through which she had passed.

In spite of her disinclination to do what she termed "the decent thing" so far as the mother of her betrothed was concerned, Edith Hale called on Mrs. Morton the day following her conversation with her father. Her reasons for this action were various. She did not want to put herself in the position of disobeying a bit of advice which she knew her parent considered equivalent to a command from him. She had nothing especial to do, and the visit would while away an hour that hung heavily on her hands.

Last, and not least, Ralph had uttered a faint reproach—couched, to be sure, in affectionate terms—because she had not yet called upon his mother. Edith did not wish him to suspect that she was annoyed at his admission that she, the girl whom he loved, could be guilty of negligence—still she felt a slight resentment at his speech and wished to justify herself in his eyes.

Ralph Morton was not a devoted son, but he wanted his fiancée to feel such intense interest in all that pertained to him that she would long to become intimate with his mother. His self-love had been slightly wounded that Edith had seemed content to remain on the terms of pleasant but casual friendship that had always existed between Mrs. James Morton and herself.

“It was not,” he reminded her, “as if mother could come to see you, darling. But she is, as you know, not strong enough to go about much.”

“But,” Edith had excused herself, “she was so ill the other night that I thought she might not be able to see me if I went to her house.”

“Oh,” returned the lover hastily, “she has quite recovered from that attack. As I told you then, she was suffering greatly—that was

the reason I had to hurry home to her—but she is quite well now. By the way, do not mention to her the fact that I told you of her illness. She is sensitive about having people know of her bad attacks.”

Mrs. Morton received Edith in her pretty boudoir.

“It is sweet of you to come, my dear,” she said. “I have been hoping to see you, but I suppose you, like other well, strong young people, are always on the go. Although I wrote to you as soon as Ralph told me of his rare good fortune, I have wanted to look into your face and tell you again how glad I am that you and my boy have learned to care for each other.”

“Thank you!” Edith returned. She felt strangely shy in the presence of this rather sentimental woman who would some day be her mother-in-law, and was at a loss as to what to say next. But there was no need of her making conversation, for Mrs. Morton—always a great talker—was so glad to have a sympathetic listener that she prattled on volubly, leaving scant opportunity for Edith to talk had she been inclined to do so.

As it was, the girl was unusually silent. Her visit to Mrs. Morton, although prescribed by her father as a remedy for her depression, was not producing upon her the effect he had anticipated. The mother's stories of Ralph's various perfections, her account of her own many ailments, instead of interesting her caller embarrassed her. Had Ralph really supposed that his mother was averse to speaking of her illness? Like many another semi-invalid, Mrs. Morton described her various symptoms at length, and, Edith thought, *ad nauseam*. All at once the girl's attention was caught by a sentence that startled her.

"But, really, I ought not to complain," her hostess was saying, "for I have not had one of my bad attacks for three months—not even a threatening of one. Why,"—noting her listener's change of expression—"why do you look so surprised?"

Edith remembered Ralph's warning only for a fleeting instant. Surely he had been mistaken in considering his mother sensitive on the subject upon which she had been discoursing at length. Besides that, was not his fiancée's judgment as good as his own?

"Because," the girl replied impulsively, "I thought that you were ill only a few nights ago—in fact on the night that—that—Tom had his accident."

"Oh, no, my dear, you are mistaken," the invalid corrected her. "I have felt very well of late—that is, very well for me. Ralph could tell you how often he has congratulated me on my improvement. And, by the way, speaking of Tom—what a shocking accident that was! Ralph told me of it with so much feeling, for, while he cannot approve of Tom's various indiscretions, yet he has always been fond of his cousin. The two men are so unlike! Ralph is so conscientious and thoughtful! Even when he was a little boy,"—etc., etc.

She was launched again on one of her lengthy and laudatory accounts of her son's virtues. Edith fixed her eyes on her, seeming to pay strict heed to what she was saying. But her thoughts were busy with an idea that was rapidly taking shape in her mind.

She could not doubt Mrs. Morton's statement with regard to her improved health of late. Then why had Ralph told her that his mother had been ill on that night on which he had said

he was summoned home? What had been his object? She longed to get away and think of the matter.

As soon as she could do so with propriety she arose, saying that she must go, as she did not want to weary her hostess by making too long a visit. "I will come again soon," she promised. "Do not ring for the maid. I can let myself out of the house without her assistance."

On her way toward the stairs she passed the open door of Ralph's sanctum. Seized with a sudden curiosity to see where her betrothed spent much of his time, she stepped softly into the room and glanced about her. On the mantel was the picture of herself which she had sent to Mrs. Morton last Christmas. A smile of gratified vanity flitted across her lips as she appreciated that the man who loved her had confiscated this gift and made it his. Going a step nearer, her eye fell upon an opened letter lying on top of a pile of magazines on the table near the window. Ralph Morton, in changing his papers this morning from the pockets in one suit to those in another, had dropped this letter, and the maid in straightening up the

room after his departure to the city had picked it up and laid it on the table.

From where Edith stood she could see the postmark on the envelope. It had been mailed in Baltimore.

To most daughters of Eve comes sooner or later the temptation to read a letter not meant for their eyes. To many a woman it is but a fleeting wish to ascertain by a single act that which otherwise she may not learn except by awaiting the deliberate sequence of events.

To the broad-minded, honorable woman the knowledge that she has, even for a second, felt an impulse that is unworthy of her better nature brings with it a self-disgust that is so much stronger than the temptation that the latter loses its power, and she turns away from it with a silent prayer of thanksgiving that she has not been permitted to do that which until now she had believed herself incapable of doing. But to her weaker sister the desire to discover something of which she has been kept in ignorance obliterates all scruples.

Such a desire, coupled with suspicion that was a thrust at her vanity, moved Edith Hale to pick up the letter lying before her. The

large, flashy chirography affected by some women of dashing personality stared out at her so suddenly that she took in the whole written message at a glance.

“Dear, I shall be in town to-morrow. Meet me for dinner at the usual place at seven-thirty. As always, E. P.”

Edith dropped the letter in sudden agitation as the suspicions caused by the Baltimore postmark on the envelope were justified by the initials signed to the communication. She recalled that these were the letters affixed to the telegram that had come for Ralph on the night of the engagement dinner, also that Ralph had told her that the sender of the dispatch had been a Mrs. Evelyn Price, and that when he had later acknowledged that at one time he had an affair with a woman—an affair of which he was ashamed—she had suspected that it was with this same woman—the woman with whom Tom had some dishonorable association. But Ralph had broken with this Mrs. Price. She gasped as she appreciated that this letter was proof positive that he had not done so. No woman would address any man as this correspondent

addressed Ralph, taking for granted his comprehension and his acquiescence, unless she was on intimate terms with him. And all this while she, his betrothed, had been deceived by him, had trusted him—or had tried to trust him.

Edith Hale's hand did not tremble as she picked up the letter from the floor and looked at it again. It bore the date of May twenty-sixth, and to-day was the twenty-eighth. The writer spoke of "to-morrow." Then it had been yesterday—last night—that Ralph was to meet her "at the usual place." And he had told his fiancée that he had a business engagement in town!

The girl laid the letter just where she had found it and went quietly down the steps and out of the house. She had made her plans before she had walked far. She would not consult her father until she had done as she pleased in this matter. Had she ever loved this man, she wondered. Her pride was hurt, her vanity cruelly wounded, she was angry—yet her heart was not sad.

She was in the habit of looking at everything from the standpoint of its effect upon herself only. Her chief regret now was that she had

announced her engagement. Yet, after all, she had never actually announced it. She had only let people congratulate her. But—she caught her breath—if Ralph could explain this letter, if he could convince her that all this was some horrible mistake—would she remain engaged to him?

She knew that of late he had bored her, that Mrs. Morton had seemed detestably egotistical and commonplace this afternoon, that as she, Edith Hale, pictured her life with Ralph Morton and his mother, she was oppressed by a conviction that such an existence would be flat, stale and unprofitable.

The woman of deep nature may not understand the frequent changes of sentiment to which this girl was subject. But it must be remembered that she had never loved any man as much as she loved herself, her own comfort and her own pleasures. Demonstrative in her expressions of affection when she was indulged, resentful when thwarted, happy in the sunshine, unhappy in the shade, fond of being loved and of being amused, she was like many another American girl of to-day. There are certain plants of the spirit that need some shadow to

make them grow. If the seeds of such were in Edith Hale's nature, there had been too much uninterrupted sunshine in her life to give them an opportunity to thrive. She did not love Ralph Morton, yet it was a very genuine feeling that made her cheeks glow and her dark eyes snap as she reached a climax in her decision.

"I'll make him uncomfortable—I'll punish him for this!" she muttered.

"Good afternoon, Miss Hale."

Edith awoke to consciousness of her surroundings with a start. Edward Dayton stood in front of her, his hat in his hand and an admiring smile on his face.

"You looked so severe that I was almost afraid to speak to you," he said laughingly; "yet your wrath—or whatever it was—was so becoming to you that I could not bring myself to the point of allowing you to pass."

The girl laughed. His presence at this juncture seemed a wonderfully happy coincidence.

"May I walk as far as your house with you?" he asked, falling into step beside her.

"Of course you may!" she replied, cordially, then chatted merrily until her home was

reached. Here she invited him to come in, and, excusing herself for a moment, sought her mother.

"Ned Dayton is here," she said hurriedly. "Won't you go down and invite him to stay to dinner?"

"But," Mrs. Hale hesitated, "isn't Ralph coming to call this evening?"

"No, he is not," Edith returned abruptly. "What's more, I don't want him! There, dear"—as she saw her mother's expression of dismay—"it's all right! I'm tired of Ralph, that's all. Now run on and invite Ned to stay."

Being a well-trained American mother, Mrs. Hale went downstairs to carry out instructions while Edith went to her room to don a bewitching dinner gown. Yet she found time before dinner to call up Ralph Morton. He had just reached home and greeted her in an affectionate voice. But his tone changed to one of consternation as he received her message. She would prefer that he did not call on her this evening.

"But I have made all my plans to come," he protested.

"And I," she said curtly, "have made all my plans not to have you come. Good night!"

## *Chapter Twenty-one*

Edward Dayton accepted with pleased alacrity Mrs. Hale's invitation to "stay to dinner."

"I was on my way from the city," he explained, "when I met Miss Edith, so I have not dressed for the evening. But I do want to accept your delightful invitation—so I hope you will pardon my business suit."

"Indeed we will," said his hostess, while her husband, coming in at this moment, seconded her cordial remarks.

John Hale was, in truth, rather relieved to see Edward Dayton, for, like his daughter, he was finding Ralph Morton's presence here evening after evening rather monotonous. Yet he raised his brows in perplexed disapproval when his wife informed him in the privacy of his dressing room that Edith was "not going to let Ralph come here to call to-night."

"She's got to stop playing fast and loose with him," the father declared. "She's either got to accept him permanently and definitely or let him go completely."

To which remark his wife deemed silence the safest reply.

Edward Dayton had admired John Hale's daughter ever since he first met her on her return from Europe a year ago, but he had not allowed himself to analyze the sensation of keen chagrin with which he learned of her engagement to Ralph Morton. This evening, as he and Edith sat together after dinner in the drawing-room, he mentioned her betrothed with the assumed lightness with which he was accustomed to conceal any serious feeling.

"I have been expecting to see Morton enter at any moment," he said. "I am in no hurry to have him come—for when he does I must be magnanimous and do as I would want to be done by in similar circumstances—and get out."

"Why?" Edith asked gravely.

Her companion laughed embarrassedly. "Because," he replied, "it would be only fair. When a man is engaged, you know, he has a right——"

"Please," she interrupted in a low, pleading tone, "please let me explain to you—as to a true friend—that which others do not know. Ralph Morton and I are not engaged."

"I suppose you mean," the man ventured, "that you do not call it yet a regular engagement—but it is equivalent to one."

"It is not!" she denied positively. "I owe you a debt of gratitude—although you may not know it—so you have a right to the truth which I have confided to nobody else. Ralph Morton and I are not engaged—nor shall we ever be, for the best reason in the world—I do not love him."

Edward Dayton strove to suppress any manifestation of the unreasonable sense of happiness that suddenly pervaded his being. But it shone from his eyes as he asked:

"What do you mean when you speak of owing me a debt of gratitude, Miss Edith? You are surely mistaken. I have never been so fortunate as to do anything that would merit your gratitude or your friendship."

"Indeed you have," she insisted. Then, with downcast eyes, she told him how she had heard him try to divert gossip from her name on the night of the dinner party. "I can never forget your kindness—never!" she said.

Ned Dayton's heart gave a throb of joy as he looked at the girl. After all, she was free.

Then were not his chances as good as another man's? He had money and social position—yet dare he aspire to the honor of winning this girl's love? As he remained silent she raised her eyes to his.

"Now you know," she said gently, "why I feel I owe you a debt of kindness."

He leaned forward eagerly. "There is something I would rather have than your kindness," he said, "and that is your friendship, your liking."

She flashed a radiant smile at him. "You ought to know that you have them already," she told him.

Friendship, liking—these might form a pretty good basis upon which to establish a warmer feeling. Perhaps, after all, the man told himself, there was hope even for him.

Edward Dayton stayed so late that Mrs. Hale had gone to her room before he left. But her husband still sat in the library reading when he heard the front door close behind his daughter's guest. Coming out into the hall the father put his arm about the girl as he kissed her good night.

"Darling," he said warningly, "that is a

nice fellow and an honorable gentleman. Don't flirt with him!"

Edith returned his scrutinizing gaze steadily. "No, dad," she replied, "I like him too much to flirt with him. But that is just between you and me, please, dad."

"And what about Ralph?" he asked. "You are forgetting him."

"I would like to," she rejoined quickly. "And I shall tell him so to-morrow."

Before he could question her further she kissed him on the cheek and ran up to her room. As John Hale locked the front door and put out the lights he shook his head.

"Is she fickle or only facile?" he wondered moodily, "and have we, by indulging and humoring her, taught her to feel no sense of responsibility? Can it be possible," frowning as a gloomy suggestion presented itself, "that we have spoiled our girl as James Morton's widow has spoiled her boy? But nonsense!" with an impatient movement of the shoulders, as if dislodging a disagreeable burden that had been placed there against his will. "With a girl it is different. A girl can stand being indulged. And when the right man comes along Edith will

settle down. But I have never felt that Ralph was the right man—in spite of some noble qualities.”

It was from Edith's own lips the next afternoon that Ralph received his final dismissal. She said nothing of the letter she had read, but she would not listen to his pleading. Her eyes were hard and she spoke with a cruelty prompted by hurt vanity, which is more bitter than wounded love.

“I don't care for you,” she said incisively. Then as he attempted a vehement and reproachful protest, she threw back her head and laughed.

“Can't you see, Ralph,” she taunted, “that I have been amusing myself all this time? And I'm tired of the game!”

What had wrought this change? he wondered as he walked homeward, surrounded by a host of dark thoughts. As he reflected on what she might have discovered, or might yet discover, he was humiliatingly afraid.

That night he confided to his mother a plan which he said had been in his mind for months. Did she not feel that it would do both him and her good to get away from Homewood? Surely

she could afford to use some of her money to take them both out to Los Angeles, where Mrs. Morton's only brother was a prosperous lawyer. Ralph acknowledged that he had always longed to accept his uncle's suggestion, made several years ago, and go into partnership with him.

He was playing his cards cleverly, for he knew that the widow's desire ever since her husband's death had been to return to her California home where she had lived until her marriage. But her son had always rebelled against the idea.

"But what about leaving Edith?" she asked tremulously after she had wiped away the tears of happiness that had gushed forth at his suggestion.

"Our engagement is broken," he said briefly. "I do not want to talk of it, mother. I entered rashly into it—and I find that I do not love the girl. I acted on the impulse of the moment in asking her to marry me. It was a mistaken sense of chivalry on my part. She sees this now. And, if you love me, mother, say nothing more to me about it."

So excited was the mother at the prospect of returning to her old home, and at Ralph's un-

selfishness in proposing it, that she suppressed any words of regret at the thought that Edith's money would never be shared by her beloved son.

## *Chapter Twenty-two*

Tom Morton was going to get well.

His friends and business associates, inquiring in person or by telephone at the hospital received this information. Constance Medford, calling up, as had been her daily custom for a fortnight, heard the glad news with quickened breath and fast beating heart. Ralph Morton, learning the verdict from Tom's office clerk, whom he chanced to meet on the street, also felt his breath come fast, but his heart sank with a sickening dread, followed by the resolution to "wind up" affairs and get away as soon as possible. This decision prompted him to tell his mother a few hours later that he was arranging to go West with her even earlier than first planned.

"I want to settle in Los Angeles before Summer really comes," he explained, "and you will find the trip beautiful in June when the country is in its fresh verdure."

Once more his mother rejoiced in her son's unselfish thought of her welfare. She mused

Then he asked eagerly, first of all, about Constance. Dr. Sheffield had told him that it was she who had found him. How had she known that he was hurt? What was she doing out alone at that time of the night? Listening to the questions of this man who had just returned from the brink of the grave, John Hale knew that he was not deceiving him, knew with a swift insight that he had always been the honorable gentleman that he had believed him to be before Ralph Morton had maligned him. So he himself replied directly, honestly, relating the story of Constance's behavior as far as he knew it, making no excuses for his own part in it, only giving the facts. The honesty of the sufferer drew from him a similar honesty.

"I could not understand the girl's action—and I do not understand it—since she had had no message from you that you were coming. Unless"—struck by an illuminating idea—"she heard me telephone you."

"She may have done so," Tom murmured. Then he was silent. The other, watching him, saw the lips take on a moved, tender curve—the expression that a man might wear who ap-

preciated what a good, pure woman had done to save him. As this thought came to the elderly man it was followed by the swift mental query: "Save him from what? Who or what could harm him? Who else knew that he was on the road to Homewood that night? Who besides Martha and Edith?"

And as startling came the recollection that Ralph was aware that the master of the house had summoned Tom that evening. For an instant he was glad that his companion's eyes were bandaged, for he felt the color leave his own face. At last he broke the silence with a question to which he tried to give a casual sound.

"Will you tell me what you remember of your accident?"

Tom spoke reluctantly. "Not very much," he said. "I was driving rapidly. I saw the light of an automobile at the roadside. I sounded my horn. I saw a figure leap forward, the hand raised in the air, I felt a flash as of fire across my eyes—and all went black."

"Did you recognize the figure?" asked the older man hoarsely.

"I am not sure," Tom replied. "I would

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And as startling came the recollection that Ralph was aware that the master of the house had summoned Tom that evening. For an instant he was glad that his companion's eyes were bandaged, for he felt the color leave his own face. At last he broke the silence with a question to which he tried to give a casual sound.

"Will you tell me what you remember of your accident?"

Tom spoke reluctantly. "Not very much," he said. "I was driving rapidly. I saw the light of an automobile at the roadside. I sounded my horn. I saw a figure leap forward, the hand raised in the air, I felt a flash as of fire across my eyes—and all went black."

"Did you recognize the figure?" asked the older man hoarsely.

"I am not sure," Tom replied. "I would

rather not think of it. It is done now. I do not—I do not—feel about some things as I would have felt once.” He tried to smile. “I’ve had lots of time to think since I came here—and I see some things in a clearer light than I used to. What good would it do to investigate my accident? None at all!”

“But there is one thing more you must tell me,” insisted John Hale. “I promise not to use it. What did the figure hold in its upraised hand?”

“I did not see,” replied Tom. “But I did not send for you to talk about myself, but to ask you about Miss Medford. Where is she?”

The nurse found her patient strangely excited when she returned to him after his caller’s departure.

“I must get well,” he told her feverishly. “Everything depends upon it.”

“Oh, no,” she soothed, her fingers on his pulse. “Not everything.”

“Yes—everything!” he insisted. And as she did not want to excite him further she did not contradict him.

“You must try to keep calm and patient if you would be well soon,” she warned him.

He started to speak impetuously, then thought better of it.

“I will try,” he promised, meekly.

## *Chapter Twenty-three*

"Edith," John Hale said at dinner on the evening after his interview with Tom Morton, "I want to talk with you in the library when Ned Dayton goes away. For," with a quizzical smile, "I suppose he is coming to-night, as usual?"

"Yes, I think he is," the girl stammered, blushing. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Oh, no," her father replied. "I suppose there must always be some one who is attentive to you. I should think you would get weary of it after a while."

Which speech showed that he did not understand his daughter. However, Edith only laughed and blushed again.

"I did get tired of the others," she acknowledged, "but I don't of Ned."

"That is—not yet," her father rejoined dryly.

It was not of Edward Dayton that he spoke when she joined him in the library later in the evening. John Hale had intimated to his wife

that he would like to see his daughter alone, and the mother, thinking that he wanted to question Edith about her latest love affair, withdrew with some trepidation and many hopes that he would let "the poor child" follow the dictates of her heart. "For she did not love either Tom or Ralph," the matron reflected as she made ready for bed. "And if Ned is the man she does love—why not let her have her own way?"

The pair downstairs were not talking of love. Seriously and dispassionately, John Hale explained to Edith his reasons for thinking that Constance had held no communication with Tom Morton except in reply to his telegram, the contents of which Tom himself had told him this afternoon. Tom had also repeated to Mr. Hale, as nearly as he could remember it, Constance's reply to the telegram. Edith was much interested. Although the details brought back to her distinctly her two former love episodes, she did not seem embarrassed by the recollection. She would have said that she was not foolishly sensitive in such matters—a statement which no one who knew her could deny.

Nor, now that it was all over, did she cherish any animosity against Constance, but was quite ready to believe that Ralph had exaggerated in saying that her cousin was untrustworthy.

"I know very well that he can lie when it suits him!" she informed her father, showing heated resentment for the only time during the conversation. For a fleeting instant she remembered Ralph's treachery to her, and the sore spot in her vanity was touched by the recollection.

"How do you know?" her father questioned.

"I would rather not tell you, dad," she said. "When a thing is disagreeable I try to forget it as soon as possible."

Her father looked at her thoughtfully, appreciating that she had uttered a pregnant truth about her own character. She would not think of painful matters, nor would she do anything that would bring her discomfort. The parent chided himself for thinking of the proverb "Light come, light go," in connection with his daughter. She was but a child—yet how lightly children could play with hearts! He turned his thoughts quickly into a different channel.

"There are one or two other things I want to ask you, little girl," he observed. "Try to tell me all that Ralph said when he stopped to see you on his way home on the night of Tom's accident."

She told him all that she could remember, but it threw no light on the problem that was puzzling him.

"He was alone, wasn't he?" the father asked.

"Oh, yes—entirely alone. And he stopped for only a minute or so."

"Did he have any parcels—or anything in his runabout that would have shown where he had been?"

"No," Edith replied, "but he said he had been to the drug store. I did not look for any parcels—though he may have had some in his car. But there was nothing there—I think"—she stopped, frowning, trying to recall an elusive memory—"except—Oh, yes, I remember now, for it seemed such a funny thing to carry in an automobile! I saw a tassèl sticking out so I looked to see what it was on, and I saw it was a long, curled-up horsewhip."

"Ah!"

The ejaculation was so sudden and vehement

that the girl started violently. "Why, dad," she exclaimed, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he said, quickly. "Nothing at all. That's enough now, dear. Run away to bed."

Left alone, John Hale sat long, thinking out the chain of evidence that seemed to have been laid ready to his hand. At the end of an hour he sighed impatiently.

"And I can't use it!" he regretted. "Tom made me promise not to talk to anybody about his affairs. If I tell him the facts which I have learned, or which I suspect, he'll do nothing about it. Perhaps"—with a sudden inspiration—"he knows or suspects it already."

Many surprising suggestions had come to this elderly man during the past few hours, and another one presented itself at this moment.

"I wonder," he exclaimed as the vivid idea took form before his mental vision, "I wonder if that's why Ralph took his mother away—because Tom is getting well and the scoundrel is afraid of him! Well, Ralph's fooled us all, and now he's gone! Even if he had stayed we couldn't punish him without hurting his mother. That's always the way with the ras-

cals in this world—there's always a mother, or wife, or some other innocent person who'll be worse hurt than the guilty ones if they get what they deserve!"

He was silent for a while. Then he sighed again and rose to his feet.

"And poor old Tom has had it all to bear alone, and there's nothing I can do for him. But yes, there is too—I can find Constance! At least I can try. And if I'm not mistaken that's the biggest kindness I could do for him. For, if I know the signs on a man's face, and I think I do, Tom loves Constance. I had hoped that Edith would take him, and I know he thought he loved her; yet"—with a shake of his head—"he never had the look about his mouth when he spoke of Edith that he had when he talked to me of Constance to-day!"

## *Chapter Twenty-four*

On a warm afternoon in mid-July Mrs. Blair was riding uptown in a Lexington Avenue car. She had been shopping and was tired. Moreover, as the lines of her face showed, she was vaguely anxious. Constance was not well. The heat was telling on her, her former governess thought. It was so late in the season that she had secured only a few pupils, and those were not of the class who can afford high-priced lessons.

The girl insisted on paying board in spite of her hostess's protestations, indeed had at last silenced further argument on the subject by declaring that if she were not allowed to pay for her food and room she would have to seek other and less desirable quarters.

So Mrs. Blair had held her peace and had done all within her power to make the child of her old school-fellow comfortable. Her efforts had been appreciated gratefully, and Constance had again and again thanked her for her goodness. The orphan never complained, yet she

had lost flesh and color. If Mrs. Blair had not promised not to betray her charge's secret, she would have been tempted to confide her anxiety to Constance's relatives. Yet Constance insisted that she was "perfectly well."

The frown of perplexity deepened upon the widow's forehead. Becoming aware of this fact she smoothed the furrow from between her brows and glanced across the aisle at the man opposite her. She started slightly when she found his eyes fixed upon her, and she bowed as he raised his hat. She fancied that his face wore an inquiring look, as if he were cudgeling his brains to recall where he had met her and whether or not he really knew her.

She was correct in her surmise, for John Hale was trying to remember the name and circumstances that went with that face. Then all at once he knew. He thought of Constance's mother. This was her old friend, the governess of little Constance, the woman whom he had seen years ago in the Medford home. Constance had often spoken of her affectionately. Might not the girl be in touch with this intimate of years gone by? He crossed the aisle and took the vacant seat beside this new-found

acquaintance, lifting his hat again as he did so.

"I beg your pardon," he said courteously, "but am I mistaken in thinking this is Mrs. Blair? I am John Hale."

To the widow the encounter seemed almost like an answer to her unspoken prayer. But her momentary delight was quickly replaced by the harrowing thought that she had no right to betray to John Hale the whereabouts of his niece, nor under what name she was living at present. Yet as she listened to what the elderly man had to say, as she heard him acknowledge that there had been a sad misunderstanding in the family, a misunderstanding which he regretted deeply and for which he was willing and eager to make amends, Mrs. Blair was sorry for him. When she reached the corner of the street on which she lived, and left the car, he got out, too, walking with her as far as her destination. At the door of the apartment house she stopped, for she feared that Constance might even now be at home. She flattered herself that she had not intimated to this man that his niece was living with her.

Yet, surely, there could be no harm in delivering to the girl a message from her uncle.

"Tell Constance," Mr. Hale was saying, "that we all made a horrible mistake, that we are all sorry, that we need her back with us." He hesitated. "You might tell her, too," he added, "that I am going to write to her in your care, trusting you to forward the letter to her. That will be better than for me to burden your mind with many messages."

"He looked so sad that I wanted to cry," Mrs. Blair told Constance that afternoon when the girl came home weary, after a long walk from the house of one of her pupils on the west side of the city. Carfare was not over-plentiful just now. Besides, Constance insisted, the exercise was good for her.

She was silent for some time after she had heard the story of her companion's encounter with John Hale. The shrill screams of the children playing on the sidewalk came up to her ears—for Mrs. Blair's apartment was not in a fashionable part of the city, although the street was respectable. Somehow to-day the youngsters seemed noisier than usual and the clang of the bells of the Lexington avenue cars more

frequent and insistent than ever before. Constance was depressed and discouraged. She was ashamed to go back to her uncle—she would not go back there an avowed failure! She would try not to think of the matter until she heard from him again.

Yet she thought of little else all that night and the next day. It was late in the afternoon when a thick envelope came to Mrs. Blair. The widow opened it and drew out an inner envelope addressed to "Miss Medford; Kindness of Mrs. Blair." Suddenly recollecting that there was "something" she wished to speak to her maid about, Mrs. Blair slipped from the room. So Constance was alone when she read her letter.

In spite of some faults, John Hale was every inch a man, and this fact was evident in his letter. He began by asking his niece's pardon for his "unwarranted impetuosity and inexcusable suspicions." He begged her to let him see her. He told her that her aunt longed for her; that Edith often wished for her.

"The child will write to you herself to tell you of her engagement to Edward Dayton,—for that is her latest and, I really think, her last

love affair," he wrote. "Ralph Morton and his mother have gone west to live. My little girl discovered her mistake in accepting Ralph and broke with him. I never asked her why. I think she does love Ned. He must go to Europe on a business trip in September and has asked to have the marriage take place before then, so that Edith may go with him. 'I would rather not leave her behind,' he told me. And, although he is very much in love, I fancied there was a twinkle in his eye as he said it. And, although I am the precious girl's father, I could not repress a smile as I told him I considered this decision wise.

"But all this is beside the question. We will soon be alone—we two old people. And we want you. If you will not forgive us enough to come back to live with us, at least say that you will come to see us."

Edith's note was affectionate, but flippant.

"I am sorry I was cross, Connie," she wrote. "Do let me see you soon. For I am going to be married the first of September to Ned Dayton and I want to tell you all about it. He is such a dear!"

Kind and conciliatory as the letters were,

and much as Constance was touched by them, she let them fall to the floor with a sharp pang of disappointment. They did not contain a word about Tom Morton.

She knew that he had left the hospital. But that was all. She did not dare telephone to his office for fear she might hear the voice she longed yet dreaded to hear. Nor would she call up his apartment for the same reason. She reminded herself often that he might be here in New York, and as she realized that, were this true, she might stand in his presence in an hour's time if she wished to, the blood would rush to her cheeks. Then would follow the swift remembrance that he might be far away, might have started out upon a long journey to regain strength after his illness. And with this thought New York seemed a very empty, desolate place.

Ever since she had learned from the hospital that the injured man had been discharged—"weak but cured," the attendant said—she had been pursued by the desire to see him, coupled with the fear of meeting him. For how could she face him if he suspected the part she had taken in all the happenings that had come so

close to tragedy? Now that she had read the news contained in her uncle's letter, she wanted to know more. Why had Ralph Morton gone away? Had he been suspected? At times she told herself that the catastrophe which had so nearly cost Tom his life might, after all, have been only an accident; that Ralph had not, perhaps, been near that part of the road when the car had skidded and crashed down into the stream. But she knew in her heart of hearts that Ralph had been guilty—if not in deed, then in desire.

So overwrought was she this evening that she could not reply to her uncle's letter. She wanted to "think it over," she told Mrs. Blair. The next day she sent John Hale a brief note, accompanying it with no hint as to her address, thanking him for his kind appreciation of her affection, asking him to try to forgive her for having made him and her aunt unhappy, but saying that she felt she ought to think long and seriously before changing her present mode of life. She sent her love to her aunt, and enclosed a little note to Edith, congratulating her on her engagement and wishing her all happiness.

For some days she received no reply to this communication, nor did she write again. Then another letter came from her uncle, urging her to set aside pride and wounded feeling and grant an interview to "the man who loved her best."

"Pardon me, my dear," he wrote, "if an old man makes this plea very strong. But as I *am* an old man, will you not grant it? Will you not tell me where you can be seen for just a few minutes? Your aunt and I beg this of you. Is it not very little to ask you to grant for love's sake?"

It was hardly fair, the girl mused, for him to put it in this way. Still, what he said was true. It was very little for her to grant to her only relatives and for the sake of their love. It was also very painfully true that her uncle was the "man who loved her best"—in fact, the only man who loved her at all. She smiled sadly as she thought how straight home he had driven the truth, and how it had stabbed her.

"But he did not know it would hurt," she whispered. "And he has not told me a word about Tom! Dear Heavens—if I only knew! But I can't ask!"

She wrote her uncle a little note, going out to

the corner herself to mail it. She would see him to-morrow afternoon at Mrs. Blair's. The widow had told her that she, herself, would be out all day to-morrow. So Constance and her uncle would not be disturbed in their conversation.

She did not acknowledge even to herself that she thought less of seeing her uncle than of hearing, perhaps, from his lips some news of the man who was never absent from her thoughts. Yet she knew that she could not bring herself to allude to him. If Tom had never cared for her it would be different.

As it was—she flushed with shame as she thought how he—how they all—would despise her if they knew that she had given him her love unsought.

She was alone the following afternoon when a ring at the front door told her that her uncle had come. She was so nervous that she rose from her seat and went to the window and stood looking out, yet seeing nothing, as she heard the maid answer the bell. Her heart beat violently as she remembered that in her wild talk on the last night she was with her

uncle she might have exposed her love for the man whom she had tried to save.

She turned, yet did not raise her eyes, as the door of the drawing room opened and closed and the newcomer took a step toward her. Then she forced herself to look up, and, as she did so, she drew back with a gasp, covering her face with her hands.

But a pair of hands stronger than hers grasped her wrists.

“Constance! Look at me!” a rich voice commanded.

She obeyed, looking into the deep blue eyes that held her gaze. And as she looked she saw such a glow of love that for a moment she could not turn away.

“You!” she whispered, “*you!*”

“Who should it be?” asked Tom Morton, tenderly.

“But my uncle——” she faltered.

“Your uncle begged you to see the man who loved you best in all the world,” Tom murmured. “Here he is, Constance. Can you doubt it, my darling?”

No other hour slips by as quickly as does

the hour when two people first acknowledge their love for each other. There is so much to be told, so many questions—that the world would call foolish—to be asked; so many answers—too beautiful for the world to understand—to be given.

“The life you saved is a poor thing at best,” Tom said at last, “but your acceptance of it makes it gloriously worth while.”

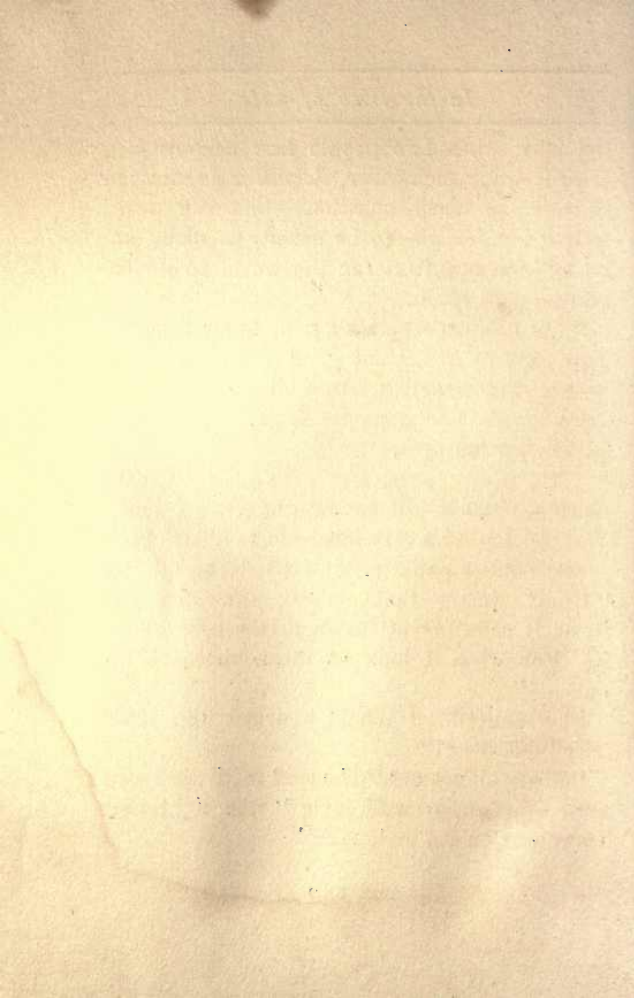
Constance laid a gentle finger on the scar just below his eyes.

“It’s pretty ugly, I’m afraid,” Tom said quickly, “but it will get fainter after a while. You don’t mind it very much, do you, darling?”

She smiled happily. “Mind!” she echoed. “Mind! No! Perhaps, after all—I rather like it, as it calls my attention to the eyes above it. For when I look at them—there shines out——”

She paused. “What?” urged the man. “Tell me, dear!”

“There shines out,” she said softly, her own eyes overflowing with love, “‘the light that never was on sea or land!’”







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